

Editorial

Children and the Church

The Church of Scotland's monthly magazine, *Life & Work*, ran a fourteen page article in its October 2002 issue on the state of the ministry in the kirk today. Stress is apparently greatly detracting from the effectiveness of many ministries, with nearly 70% of kirk ministers claiming to be affected by it. The tragedy is that it would appear the situation can only get worse, for with each succeeding year the number of those in active ministry is set to diminish, thus burdening fewer and fewer clergy with more and more work, larger parishes and multiple congregations to care for.

Surprisingly, few have seriously asked why the number of those entering the ministry has fallen so disastrously. True, some answers have been offered, such as the modest level of ministerial remuneration – hence the plans to increase stipends significantly. What is surely astonishing, however, is that no clear voice has been heard stating the

obvious: the shortage of candidates for ministry arises from the plain fact that there are at least three generations missing from most congregations. Yes, there are exceptions (from which generally the few candidates come who are in training). But it is embarrassingly self-evident that the average age of the average congregation is well over 60 years. Few children are found in church on Sundays and fewer young people. Where then are candidates for the ministry to come from?

For at least thirty years, our congregational methods and strategy for teaching boys and girls has been a major cause for concern in my own thinking. Though I seldom have been heard in Presbyteries, this is a topic on which I have spoken with some passion. During the same thirty-year period, I never had an article published in *Life & Work* – except a single piece on exactly this subject (April 1982). And now I am on the very threshold of retirement, I find myself still as vexed

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and distraught by the lemming-like policies which the vast majority of churches follow with no apparent consideration of the consequences.

Sunday Schools

The relevance and need of the Sunday School is not for me axiomatic. Indeed, I can see persuasive arguments against them as we have them now. For example, unless the teaching is of a high standard, Sunday Schools can trivialize the great truths of the Christian faith; consequently, bad teaching can implant in children's minds false impressions of the gospel. If that is not disturbing enough, such poorly run Sunday Schools will inoculate boys and girls against the church for years to come. What minister in his visiting has not come across scores of adults who quickly claim to have been bored out of their minds by forced attendance at Sunday School?

Where then are candidates for the ministry to come from?

I am convinced that over the past century, hundreds of Sunday Schools run by the most well-meaning of people have unwittingly acted as forces for ill and have hindered, not helped, the work of Christ's kingdom. Children have recordings in their brains which tell them church is irrelevant, the gospel is for toddlers, and the stories they were taught would be best left up the sycamore tree in which a wee man called Zaccheus played hide and seek with Jesus.

The original intention

Henry Ford claimed that history was bunkum! Alas, if only we had been more *au fait* with the history of the Sunday School. Though our historic denominations are accused nowadays of having been in 'maintenance mode' for the past 450 years, rather than in 'missionary mode', there have been shining exceptions. The Sunday School is one. Those who gathered children

into the 19th-century Sabbath Schools had the grand aim to reach the unchurched 'street children' for Christ. Those first Sunday Schools were both evangelistic and humanitarian in their aim. Little did the early pioneers who started them guess how their purpose and scope would completely change!

The departure from the original purpose has been great. Over the decades of the 20th century, Sunday Schools gradually have ceased to be forms of outreach and have changed in their character to become 'congregational'. With what result? We have imperceptibly but most surely relieved parents of their divinely appointed task of nurturing their children in the faith and assigned that responsibility to others. We have assumed that the glorious truths of grace can be transmitted in a couple of dozen fifteen-minute lessons each year. We have abolished the 'family pew' and separated off parents from children – sending them out after the first ten minutes, so actively promoting the monstrous deception that congregational worship is only for adults.

Conformity

The charge has often been made against Christians that they are nothing more than 'conformists' – blindly following the dictates of someone else and not thinking out life's problems for themselves. Nothing could be further from biblical truth. It is the worldly person who conforms to the fashions and opinions of the day. (Read David Murie's article in this issue of the Journal on 'Christians and the Media' to be reminded how subtly people's thinking is controlled and formulated by others.) Believers who follow Christ through the Scriptures will find their minds stimulated, stretched and enabled to reach far out into the immense mysteries and complexities of life. More, far from being conformists, believers are summoned to resist *conformity* and to go for *transformation* – metamorphosis – to the perfect, good and acceptable will and purpose of God.

Nevertheless, in the Sunday School strategy most churches follow, conformity to prevailing ideas has been seen as the only option. The attitude has been, 'We can't beat them, so we'll have to join them!' I refer to the almost universal assumption that children cannot possibly sit through an hour-long service with a twenty-five minute sermon.

We are all aware that primary school educational methods have changed. Where children used to be taught to sit and work quietly (and were often punished instantly for daring even to whisper to a neighbour), they now are encouraged to consult, to move about the classroom and to use computers, calculators and other equipment. The transition from such a classroom ethos to a one-hour stint sitting on a hard pew is generally held to be unthinkable, because it is assumed to be unreasonable. And so Sunday Schools use 'powerpoint', drama, percussion bands and role play as well as quite sophisticated visual aids for teaching the Bible lesson.

It would be ridiculous to decry the use of new teaching methods. I have no quarrel with seeking to make the message of the Bible as interesting and comprehensible as possible. My complaint is the unthinking assumption that children should not be subjected to 'adult worship'. Indeed, if the contemporary teaching aids and methods are worth their salt, should they not enable the child to 'tune in' to worship and begin to start on the great adventure of the journey of faith?

A daunting task

The problem is that to change a congregation's perception of Sunday mornings is going to be a daunting task for the most courageous of ministers. Parents have come to regard Sunday School as a 'baby-sitting agency' to save children from boredom with the Service. It would be regarded as unacceptable to expect parents first to bring children to church an hour earlier than the Service for a Sunday School which met before (or to collect them an hour after the Service for a

Sunday School which met after). It is so easy, so convenient, so obvious, they will argue, for everyone to come together and divide up into different groupings – Bible Class in one room, Nursery Department in another, Juniors in another and grown-ups in church. That's the way we do it. Any other way is old-fashioned and went out in the fifties!

Consider, however, another scenario. Let's assume that a primary 6 child starts to stay in the service with his parents. Well-chosen hymns will introduce him to the moods of praising, rejoicing, reflecting, seeking, longing. Good public reading of Scripture will cause mighty truths of the Word of God to reverberate in his ears and thus in his heart. Relevant preaching with clear application will lay a moral and spiritual foundation on which he will begin to build his thinking. And if all this goes hand in hand with well-applied modern

Friday evening. So Josh (P5) and Debbie (P6) can stay in church with the rest of the family, while Tom (P3) still goes out for part of the Service.

Second, most congregations have a rapidly expanding reservoir of computer talent within their ranks. Each week worksheets based on the theme of the sermon could be prepared which will keep Josh and Debbie busy during the preaching, listening with one ear to the sermon to work out the answers to the puzzles and questions on the worksheet. I first heard of this idea from the late James Montgomery Boice and I am aware of at least three congregations in Scotland using it with undoubted success.

Third, parents should be challenged to take up their divinely given responsibility of teaching their own children, instead of handing it over to others and assuming Sunday School looks after that. They could be given the Sunday School material to use

Let's assume that a primary 6 child starts to stay in the service with his parents...

teaching of the Christian faith at a time which does not preclude him staying in church with his father, then the two weekly experiences should unite in introducing him to the life and the community of faith.

Three suggestions

I know perfectly well the colossal difficulties of reorganising the congregation's programme to make it possible for primary 5 or 6 children to begin staying in church with their families. I have had block resignations of Sunday School teachers on this issue. But I would like to offer three suggestions as to how such a reorganisation might be effected, to the benefit of the child, the family and the church.

First, for slightly older children, a weekday club of some kind could replace the Sunday School. The same lessons and songs and drama could be provided at 6 o'clock on a Tuesday or

themselves at home for this purpose, either on a Sunday afternoon or evening by evening before Josh and Debbie go to bed.

A spin-off from such a reorganisation of the Sunday morning programme might be that ministers preparing their sermons would bear in mind the presence of Josh and Debbie, and have applicatory material which turns out to be not only for the children, but even more effective for the adults. For unless we become like little children, we cannot enter the kingdom of heaven.

Joining and Leaving

Stuart Murray Williams, Oxford

Attempts to describe the changes taking place in contemporary culture have frequently resorted to the use of 'post-' terminology. We live, we are told, in (among other things) a post-colonial, post-feminist, post-structural, post-Marxist, post-industrial and post-modern society. Commentators on the church have adopted this terminology and depict the 21st century church as post-Christendom, post-evangelical, post-liberal, post-charismatic and post-denominational.

Quo vadis?

Such impressive sounding terms may mean little more than 'we don't know where we are heading but we know things aren't the same as they were.' The prefix 'post', of course, simply means 'after': if we use these terms (and I certainly do) we are describing society or the church in relation to the past rather than the present or the future. If we knew how to describe the present or if we had predictions about the future we would use a terminology that was more illuminating and less backward glancing. However, in a complex and rapidly changing culture such terminology may be appropriate as well as honest.

We cannot tell how things may be in 30 years time, or even 3 years time, but

we know they are different from 30 years ago. That is certainly true in our culture, and it appears to be increasingly evident in our churches too – sometimes because churches are eagerly embracing change and exploring new forms of worship, community and mission; sometimes because the only alternative to change is closure.

The question has been asked: 'Is decline inevitable?' We will be exploring this in various ways. I want to reflect with you in this article on some of the changes apparent in church life, especially in relation to entry and exit points. Our churches may be experiencing overall decline, but this covers a complex scenario where some are on the way out of our churches, and others are on the way in. Why are they leaving? Why are they joining? These are important people in relation to the issue of decline. And I want to use yet another 'post-' term to introduce my comments: post-commitment.

Post-Commitment

In a post-commitment age, churches are grappling with various trends:

- Many of those who attend our churches, even many who are regular attenders and active participants, resist

becoming members. Recent figures have indicated that attendance at UK Baptist churches is rising slowly but membership is dropping.

- For many attenders or members being 'regular' means twice a month rather than twice a week and it is increasingly difficult to persuade people to take on regular responsibilities in church life, especially if these are not time-limited.

- Many Christians who move to a new home in a different area have no loyalty to a particular denomination but choose a new church on the basis of the style of its worship, the warmth of its welcome, the quality of its children's ministry, the relevance of its preaching or the comfort of its seats rather than its brand name – its denomination.

- An alarming number of Christians are no longer involved in church life at all but have opted out of any kind of belonging. A recent estimate suggests that there may now be 1 million professing Christians in Britain who are not connected to the church, and that this is by far the fastest growing portion of the Christian community.

Congregational meltdown?

These trends are not easy for church leaders to interpret or deal with. They pose significant challenges, especially if our aim is to maintain the kinds of

the 21st-Century Church

church programmes and organizations that were suitable in a different culture but are likely now to be unsustainable. But these are realities we face and it is crucial that we reflect on them and decide how to respond. The next 30 years may well be critical for the future of the church in western culture. The Church of Scotland is one of four British denominations that have acknowledged recently that if present trends continue they will each close their last congregation in the 2030s. We are facing not just declining and ageing congregations but denominational meltdown. A fifth will not publish its figures but it likely to die slightly sooner.

Vibrant initiatives

It is important that we pay attention to these trends and scenarios, but important too that we are not paralysed by them. There are healthy growing churches in many places. There are vibrant mission initiatives impacting local communities. There are pioneers exploring new ways of 'being church' that may offer all of us clues for the future. I do not believe continuing decline is inevitable, but neither do I believe that trying ever harder to make old models work is pastorally wise or missiologically apt.

In a post-commitment era we are faced with exactly the same challenge as our forebears were in theirs – discovering how to proclaim and incarnate the good news of the kingdom in contemporary culture. And in a plural society like ours, we will not be searching for one model of church but many, some quite different from what we are used to, others quite familiar but attuned more carefully than at present to a post-commitment culture.

Serious reflection needed

We do need to reflect on the challenges facing the churches in the light of wider cultural trends, for it is not just churches that are suffering from diminished participation. Political organizations, voluntary associations, community groups and other institutions requiring regular commitment are all struggling to maintain their membership and activities. There seem to be several factors at work here, including:

- the scepticism and cynicism that pervades postmodernity discourages enthusiasm for involvement in organizations
- the distrust of institutions in contemporary culture further discourages such involvement

- the consumer mentality that dominates our culture militates against commitment to an organization and encourages shopping around
- the multiplicity of choices available in contemporary society discourages regular involvement with any one option
- spectatorism within our culture discourages active participation and encourages non-participatory allegiance (thus organizations are growing that require a subscription rather than attendance)

Church disconnected from people networks

However, it is important not to get out of perspective this decline in institutional membership and wariness of participating. As Michael Moynagh (2001:71) notes in his recent book, *Changing World, Changing Church*: 'membership of trade unions, political parties and other organizations is in decline. Exodus from church reflects this shift from a joining to a stand-alone society. Yet a number of organizations have increased their membership by leaps and bounds – Friends of the Earth and other environmental groups, for example...: people have not abandoned groups, they have fled particular types of group – and church is one of them.... This is

largely because church is increasingly disconnected from people's networks – from their friends and work-mates, and from shops, clubs, health clinics and other places they visit.¹

So some kinds of organizations are flourishing. What can we learn from these? What kinds of churches might flourish in a post-commitment era?

As we continue to reflect on these issues, I want to focus our thinking by concentrating on two significant groups of people: those who are leaving our churches and those who are joining them. Why are they leaving? How are they joining? If we can understand more about the entry points and exit routes, perhaps this will give us insights into other dimensions of church in a post-commitment era. Let's start by looking at the back door of the church.

Leaving the Church

Books and reports on the issue of why people are leaving the church are developing into a significant genre of contemporary Christian literature. From these and from conversations with church leavers a number of things are becoming clear:

- current forms of church life are not working for very significant number of Christians
- many of these Christians have left the church in recent years and more will leave in the coming years
- many other Christians feel similarly about church life but remain out of loyalty, habit or inertia
- those leaving include deeply committed Christians, who were at the heart of the church and often in leadership roles
- there are various reasons for leaving, but some dominant themes emerge from the literature and conversations
- undoubtedly some of those who have left have abandoned their Christian faith but many have only abandoned church
- some of those who have left are not interested in returning to church; others miss their church involvement,

in spite of everything, and want to find a way back

- some do eventually return to church, often to a very different tradition from the one they left or to a newly planted church
- some are disillusioned and bitter, critical of the church as an institution and with no expectation that things can change, while others are longing for authentic church life and hoping for something new to emerge
- the numbers involved are very large
- this exodus is impacting all denominations and all kinds of churches – including new and growing churches and networks

Blaming those who have left the churches for disloyalty, or attributing their departure to deficiencies in their character, faith or relationships is an attractive option for those who do not want to ask searching questions about contemporary church life. But it does not do justice to the evidence, which suggests that there are multiple reasons for disaffection and that churches should take responsibility for the reasons many give for leaving.

Disturbing pastoral ignorance

The most recent addition to the genre is Alan Jamieson's excellent study of those who had left Evangelical,

What kinds of churches might flourish in a post-commitment era?

Pentecostal and Charismatic (EPC) churches². Based on doctoral research in New Zealand, it is very perceptive and applicable to the scene in western culture generally. One of the most disturbing sections in the book compares the reasons given by leavers for leaving with the assumptions of the ministers of the churches they had left. It is worth reading at some length:

'The disparity between the views of church leaders who were either puzzled, tentative or blaming the individual with the comments of

church leavers themselves points to the lack of communication between the two. Very few church leaders talked of incidents where they had sat down with leavers from their own churches, or any other church, to hear people's reasons and learn from them. This sideline speculation of the leaders continued despite their knowledge that many of the leavers were intelligent, creative and innovative people who had previously been significant leaders within their churches. When church leaders did give reasons they focused on the increased pressure on people's time with new leisure opportunities, tv, work demands, and growing numbers of women in the workforce. Such societal changes were seen as increasing the pressures on people and decreasing their discretionary time. While the leavers too identified these pressures only ten percent indicated that they were a factor in their decision to leave and of those this was a relatively minor contributing factor in their final decision...

'Within the group of 54 church leaders interviewed were ten

counsellors but only a very small number of the pastors and ministers about the changing faith dynamics at work within leavers. One of the most disturbing results of the research is the sense that the majority of those leading and pastoring in EPC churches are ignorant of the crucial reasons why people leave the church. Their ignorance remains despite the detailed knowledge of lecturers in theological colleges, counsellors and a number of leavers who have well-articulated and comprehensive understandings of the changing faith dynamics that lead people to leave the EPC church.'

Perhaps we can note a number of things from this disturbing summary of the evidence:

- the reasons why Christians choose to leave churches are not secret, they are well documented and accessible to those who really want to know
- many ministers seem to prefer to ignore these reasons and attribute leaving to other causes rather than facing the challenges they present
- social and cultural influences do play a part in a post-commitment era, but they are not primary – there are other factors at work
- in a post-commitment era loyalty to institutions will not be strong enough by itself to hold people in our churches – they must be worth belonging to

Churches worth staying in

So we return to the question: what kinds of churches might flourish in a post-commitment era? What kinds of churches might be worth staying in rather than leaving? Listening to the leavers, we might offer the following suggestions:

- churches that provide space for spiritual development rather than spoon-feeding their members
- churches that focus on God rather than the minister or the programmes
- churches that offer authentic community and friendship rather than

Very few church leaders... had sat down with leavers... to hear people's reasons

theological lecturers and four Christian counsellors and psychotherapists. A very small number of the pastors but the vast majority of lecturers and counsellors raised another reason for people's decisions to leave: the changing dynamic of people's faith which often encourages them to move outside of the church. This was a reason which meshed with the accounts of leavers. What struck me was the depth of understanding of many of the lecturers, all of the

even in a context of overall decline many people are joining churches of many different kinds

institutional forms of belonging or insipid forms of fellowship

- churches that engage creatively and sensitively with contemporary culture and social and ethical issues
- churches that equip their members for the world of work
- churches that treat adults as adults
- churches that allow room for dialogue as well as monologue
- churches that are self-critical, especially in relation to power politics
- churches that allow doubts, anger and lament as well as joyful certainty
- churches that are realistic about the rhythms and pressures of modern life
- churches that have a holistic vision rather than a privatized spirituality

Joining the Church

Let's look now, more briefly, at the other significant group—those who are joining our churches (I am referring to new recruits, not those who transfer from other churches). It is important to recognize that even in a context of overall decline many people are joining churches of many different kinds. They may be wary of becoming members; they may come less frequently than we might want; and they may not want to participate in all the activities we organize. But they are joining. What do we know about how and why they join?

Reflections on *Alpha*

We could look at research that has been carried out in recent years but I want instead to reflect on the entry route that has been most successful in the past decade – *Alpha*. I am aware that this course has its critics, that it does not work everywhere, that some churches have tried it and been disappointed by the results. There are various aspects of *Alpha* that trouble me. I don't think it starts far enough back in the Bible for a post-Christendom society; I don't think it

addresses many of the issues raised by a postmodern culture; I am concerned that it produces 'McDonaldised Christians' rather than radical disciples, and so on. I am not an advocate of *Alpha*. But I am an interested observer, wondering what we can learn from its phenomenal success about how and why people join churches.

There seem to me to be some key elements of *Alpha* that go some way to explaining its impact. You may think of others, but I want to highlight five:

- food – sharing a meal together is becoming counter-cultural in a society that is dispensing with dining tables and 'grazing' rather than participating in the intimacy of shared meals
- friendship – those who participate are generally invited by friends, and the course works well if the group gels and friendships develop
- dialogue – although there are lengthy monologue presentations, there is scope for conversation, questions, discussion, debate and disagreement
- process – although the course is relatively brief, there is time for understanding to grow and for faith to develop without pressure to make a decision
- spiritual encounter – the Holy Spirit weekend is the pivot of the course, when apologetics gives way to spiritual encounter

I wonder whether the process is long enough, whether the approach is too 'modernistic', whether the monologue is overdone, whether the content is too rationalistic, whether the freedom to engage in dialogue is adequate. But I think *Alpha* is pointing us towards a way of being church that is significant as more than just an effective recruiting tactic.

Compare these aspects of *Alpha* with our list of features of churches worth staying in. There are some differences, which we would expect as we move from an introductory course to a full-orbed Christian community, but there is quite a lot of overlap. Potential church joiners and potential church leavers seem to respond in not dissimilar ways.

Integrating new Christians

One problem that a number of churches running *Alpha* successfully are experiencing is how to integrate joiners into regular church life. The transition is often far from smooth. In some places there is such strong resistance to dispersing the course into home groups that this has not happened. Those used to opportunities for dialogue are now confronted with weekly monologues with no chance of asking questions or challenging what they have heard. The friendship of the *Alpha* course does not seem to characterize the church services they are now expected to attend. And where has the food gone? I am not aware of any *Alpha* course that has yet developed into a new church, but I know this is under discussion and I expect it will happen soon.

Believing and belonging

What *Alpha* also represents is apparent across the churches regardless of whether they use this course or anything like it. Increasingly belonging precedes believing.³ And this is true in other churches that historically have emphasized believing before belonging, baptism before membership, commitment to Christ before commitment to the church. Church joiners are finding their way into churches and participating in their community life before they have worked out what they believe. This belonging may not be anything like covenanted commitment, but in a post-commitment era it is an interesting twist on the issues we have been examining.

The relationship between believing and belonging has been studied by researchers trying to understand the connection between what people believe and their participation or otherwise in religious institutions. Interaction between believing and belonging takes various forms, including:

- *believing and belonging*: in Christendom there was a requirement that everyone within European society

growing numbers of churches... are discovering... that many need to belong before they believe

believed what the church taught and belonged to this church

- *belonging but no longer believing*: in the fading decades of Christendom, some continued to belong out of loyalty or social convention but no longer believed – the phenomenon of nominality

- *belonging but only partly believing*: the influence of post-modernity is seen in a tendency to pick and mix what one believes, as those who belong do not feel the need to assent to all that the church teaches

- *believing but no longer belonging*: as post-Christendom and post-modernity develop, some continue to believe but choose no longer to belong – arguably a different form of nominality that raises the theological question of how long belief is sustainable without community

- *belonging but not yet believing*: in post-Christendom, growing numbers of churches, regardless of their theology, are discovering and acknowledging that many need to belong before they believe

- *believing but belonging less intensely*: it is clear from recent research (reported in Brierley 2000:90)⁴ that belonging no longer implies the same level of personal participation than before: '58% of church-goers attend at least once a week, 69% fortnightly and 78% monthly; 10% of the population attend church at least once a month, and 16% once a year'

- *believing and belonging intermittently*: recent research has also indicated that believing and belonging are dynamic rather than static categories – many who continue to believe after they stop belonging choose to belong again later, sometimes as they encounter a church plant

- *believing but not yet belonging*: in a postmodern culture where spirituality is in vogue, some will come to

Christian faith outside the church and will not assume that belonging is an important expression of their faith

• *neither belonging nor believing*: although the relationship between believing and belonging is complex (as witnessed by this summary), they are linked; what is unclear is whether the more significant factor is that ceasing to belong results in ceasing to believe or that ceasing to believe results in ceasing to belong; but it is likely that whatever the starting point, both for individuals and for our culture, loss of belief and loss of belonging will eventually be the joint outcome

Churches worth staying in

So we are losing out of the back door of our churches those who generally still believe but no longer feel they belong. And we are welcoming through our front doors those who may not yet believe but are beginning to feel they belong. It's a confusing time to be a minister, isn't it?

Actually, the message may be rather clearer than this makes it sound. Those who join our churches do so because they find there something worth joining, regardless of whether they

believe everything our churches teach. Those who leave our churches do so because they do not find them worth staying in, regardless of whether they still believe most of what our churches teach.

And strangely enough, but very helpfully as we think about both effective mission and responsible pastoral care, the things that make churches worth joining and staying in are not that different.

Solid hope

There is a multiplicity of various experiments and there are emerging forms of church, some of them hopeful signs of ways forward in this confusing era. I am encouraged by the creativity and courage of those who are pioneering and taking risks. I believe such developments are crucial and I am doing what I can to nurture and resource some of these groups in Britain. But the underlying concern I carry is that some of these new forms of church will only end up being shaped differently or using new words for old structures. If that is so, the hope they represent will fade. The only solid hope for both older and newer

churches in post-Christendom is to become the kinds of communities that those on the margins of our churches, those on the way in and those on the way out, all tell us they are looking for – churches that offer an encounter with God in worship, authentic friendship and community, earthed spirituality, cultural relevance and the freedom to grow as human beings and followers of Jesus.

This article was originally a paper given at the Rutherford House Church & Ministry Group in September 2002 by Dr S Murray Williams. See his book *'Church Planting'* (Paternoster, 1998) for in-depth thinking through many related issues raised in this article.

- 1 *Changing Church, Changing World*, Michael Moynagh, Monarch, 2001
- 2 *A Churchless Faith*, Alan Jamieson. SPCK, 2002
- 3 See article in RJCM 7.2, *Believing & Belonging*, Andrew Bathgate.
- 4 *The Tide is Running Out*, Peter Brierly. Christian Research, 2000.

The Value of Theological Education for Ministry and Service

Tony Sargent, Glasgow

I begin by declaring a personal interest in the subject! I would not have spent nearly thirty very happy years in a church which I loved, and suffered the pain of being torn away from it to come to Glasgow if I were not fully persuaded of the value of theological training. My personal commitment to training extends beyond ICC to an institution nearly twice its size. Logos Bhavan is Operation Mobilisation's centre in the heart of India. I am also committed to help Serampore University (of William Carey fame) and Calcutta Bible College re-establish themselves and have a similar interest in East Africa.

Seminaries or cemeteries?

Years ago George Verwer was not appreciative of seminaries. He often gained a chuckle by deliberately mispronouncing them as cemeteries. Recently, however, I heard Verwer argue passionately for such training. I had a transcript made of his address, treated it to some mild editing and

have in front of me this new booklet *Why go to Bible College?* Verwer supplies eleven advantages of such theological education. He is concerned that in Europe colleges on the whole are finding survival difficult.

From the prolific pen of C. Peter Wagner has come *Churchquake* (Regal Publications). This book is an assessment of the new apostolic churches in the US (generally called the New Churches over here). In his wide-ranging critique of conservative Christianity he dedicates his penultimate chapter to warning about training colleges or seminaries. He reckons that unless there is a radical rethink their life and effectiveness will be curtailed. He too uses the seminary-cemetery analogy and identifies several 'tombstones' which mark the death of conservative institutions. Coming from someone who has given forty years as a professor at Fuller Seminary, we should note carefully what he has to say.

Here in the UK the number of students offering themselves for training in university divinity departments is already spiralling downwards. And even the Bible College Movement, which nowadays pulls in more students than all the university faculties, is engaged in a student number struggle. My point is that we ought to heed Wagner's warnings as well as Verwer's encouragement. More of this in a while.

A Biblical Basis

Let me offer you some biblical criteria in regard to theological training. The aged Paul wrote to his son in the faith, Timothy, *Do your best to present yourself as one approved, a workman who has no need to be ashamed rightly handling the word of God* (2 Tim. 2:15). Similarly in old age the apostle Peter makes an appeal to Christians, *Always be prepared to make a defence to anyone who calls you to account for the hope that is in you* (1 Pet. 3:15).

It is significant that our Lord chose twelve disciples and gave the larger share of his time training them. Why? It becomes obvious when he asserts he will not always be with them. As Campbell Morgan put it, he gambled the future of the church on the successful ministry of these eleven men. *I am the vine; you are the branches*. What he taught would be echoed by them, what he was would be replicated in them. His training affected the 'whole person'. His goal of total spiritual formation was paramount. They were to be conformed to his image.

On his missionary journeys, Paul took men with him – presumably younger companions who benefited from his public preaching and teaching, and also from coming up close to his lifestyle. They were influenced by his total demeanour: *Be followers of me as I am of the Lord* (Phil. 3:17). It had particular relevance to his trainees. The man *in Christ* (2 Cor. 12:2) wanted the formation of Christ in them so that teacher and taught might be able to affirm they no longer lived for Christ, for he lived in them (Gal. 2:20).

Theological education today will only serve the church well if it embraces the same goals: men and women who are in Christ, theologically competent, spiritually empowered, evangelistically geared and globally committed.

Take now with me the huge jump from the 1st to the 21st century.

The world in which we live

I highlight three aspects (there are many more) each of which deserves a paper on its own. The world scene into which the trained student enters has changed!

A pluralistic age which denies absolute truth

Most of Martyn Lloyd-Jones' volumes post-date the cessation of his Westminster ministry. Two exceptions were *Truth Unchanged Unchanging* and *Authority*. In the 1930s and 40s devastating attacks were made on the Bible. Evangelical scholarship was in

its infancy. We owe much to those who challenged liberal scholarship, rediscovering the doctrines of the Evangelical Awakening and the historic faith.

Today, the challenge is no less. We are told that there is no mega-narrative. All beliefs have truth values; none should be exclusive. At the heart of Hinduism are gracious gods promoting a gracious life. From Downing Street,

Whether through the drug culture or the crystals of new age practitioners, it is fashionable to have spiritual experience

no less, has come the pronouncement that Islam is a peaceful religion. What was once lampooned as the 'scandal of particularity' is still today a scandal though the conclusion is reached from a different starting point.

A spiritual age which denies uniform experience

My second point is a development of the first. If truth has no absolutes, experience has no single anchorage. The 'age of Aquarius' has opened the door to infinite permutations of spirituality. Whether through the drug culture or the crystals of new age practitioners, it is fashionable to have spiritual experience. But claims for an experience of new birth, of salvation through the cross of Christ, belief in the ethical consequences that flow from sins forgiven are not welcome as a universal necessity. 'If what is true and real for you works – fine, but don't push your experience on to me. And don't push your ethical family values on me either!' Thus, we are beyond the cult of uniformity. Evangelism is out, prescribed standards are an impertinence.

A knowledgeable society which is biblically ignorant

'Bloody religion!' The expletive came from my taxi driver who had the news on as he took me to Sheffield station. No time to tell him that what he was hearing had nothing to do with

Christianity. Talk to him about the faith once delivered to the saints, and he would think of some football club which once was aggressive in its play. When Spurgeon was alive, even when Lloyd-Jones was with us, preachers assumed a basic knowledge of the Bible and historic Christianity. The average child today opens his computer with ease but if ever he opens a Bible it is with confusion. Thus children

theological education. The observation is made that if men who never spent a day in a seminary can build successful ministries like Prison Fellowship, Focus on the Family and Willow Creek Community Church, why have seminaries at all?

A personal note

When I came to Glasgow a leading New Church leader kindly wrote me a letter of encouragement. It came out of the blue and was welcome. Later when in the incredible providence of God the International Christian College acquired our new building complex, I asked him to join with others like Drs John Stott and Sinclair Ferguson to give a couple of lines of commendation which we would use for our publicity brochure. He refused. The response letter was warm but firm, he felt that though he could commend me at a personal level, our way of teaching would be outmoded and our appreciation of the dynamic of the Spirit would not be total. I know what he was trying to say. And I actually think he was both right and wrong. There are warnings we desperately need to heed for Bible Colleges to survive and thrive.

Glasgow's necropolis

It is only in Glasgow that I have found the term necropolis in use. The city of the dead lies at the back of the Cathedral, just beyond our college. We get no trouble from it! We are not disturbed by its noise. We do not know who is buried there. And the remains of people who were buried there in the days of Edward Irving lie there still!

It is possible for colleges to be like Glasgow Cathedral's necropolis. When our Lord spoke of the dead, the hermeneutic seems to suggest a safe but stagnant position. How do we avoid it? How can Bible Colleges survive? How does theological education gear itself to the 21st century and justify its existence? How can the points I consider to be valid raised by Patterson and my 'apostolic'

When our Lord spoke of the dead, the hermeneutic seems to suggest a safe but stagnant position

have become the least evangelised and the most exploited group worldwide. That is why we have dedicated a whole three-year course to teach the theology of the child.

Inconsequential methodologies

Into this world scene we send those we train, and for this world scene we fashion our training – a scene so different from the one I entered as a young preacher 35 years ago. Yesterday's proven methodologies are often inconsequential and fruitless in the face of present day complexities. The Bible College movement, if it is to have any value at all, needs constant readjustment. The Reformation watchword *semper reforma semper reformata* should also be the maxim that drives forward our training programmes. Often theological syllabi are set in concrete. Wagner complains that in the States there has been no adjustment in years in the syllabus of many seminaries.

Robert Paterson writing in *Christianity Today* laments in Wagnerian style the irrelevance of the seminary:

'The very moment evangelical theological education appears to have come of age, some influential parachurch leaders are questioning the whole idea of

friend be countered? We would be fools to ignore them. In attempting a reply and coming towards an end, I lean, though not very heavily, on Wagner. In order to ward off the necropolis state with its tombstone analogy and promote relevance and vibrancy, I argue for a theological education in which the following five points are recognised.

1. Ministry skills are recognised to be of greater importance than academic achievement.

A cynical definition of a theologian is 'a person who spends his time answering questions that no one is asking'. If we inflict subjects on our charges which are more geared to history than the 21st century we are in trouble. My calling is to communicate. I may not be good at it, but I try. I communicate to audiences. I preach. And to preach I need help.

My greatest need in preaching is to be relevant. How do I feed sheep digestible food? Where do I find material to stimulate and feed me before I communicate? For the latter I need books. Having confessed my bias as a preacher let me tell you what I do as a principal when surveying the modules we have to offer. I check bibliographies. My first test is invariably pragmatic. Will the suggested list help my students to minister? Will they help a youth leader, a children's worker, a counsellor? Will they help them to think christianly and apply and speak out what they have learned?

Chalcedon and difficult deacons

Steve Chalke of Oasis fame lamented the other day at a meeting we hosted for him in Glasgow the inability of ministers in front of the camera to articulate their faith in a meaningful way to an uninitiated audience. Few churches have split over the vexed issues that arose at the Council of Chalcedon, but many have torn themselves apart at the monthly church council. Neither Chalcedon nor Nicea does anything to help a feuding

church! But the development of people skills will.

'How to handle a difficult session of the diaconate' demands as much time on the curriculum as exploring Nestorianism and Sabellianism! I am not saying historic councils and the reason for their being held are unimportant but an ability to chair a

Teach your students to know God – only that will keep them in the firing line of ministry as successful combatants

church council in a harmonious fashion is of equal if not greater value!

2. Telephony is recognised as the reverse side of theology and its pursuit is equally encouraged.

What God has joined together let not man – nor theological institutions – set apart. The Word of God is a vehicle which leads us to the God of the word. This is what makes theology not only the queen of the sciences but the most hallowed of all disciplines. When handled well what is unique will be to the benefit of our charges and they in turn to the church. If we do it badly the effect is worse than sending envelopes containing anthrax. It is as people are encouraged to expect the presence of God and empowerment of the Spirit that they are equipped. A missionary travelled to see me when speaking in Newcastle recently. She said, 'You do not know me, but I have come to plead with you to do one thing. Teach your students to know God – only that will keep them in the firing line of ministry as successful combatants.'

Above all, holiness!

Uttering similar sentiments, Denton Lotz, chairman of the Baptist World Alliance preaching in Prague recently, called for a reformation in Religious Education in which serious attention is accorded to spirituality. Giving the example of Russian believers who used piety in the days of communist

persecution to witness to the power of the gospel, Lotz called for a life of holiness among students. 'While the media and secular young people may ridicule that life,' he said, 'the fact remains that the Christian student's life which exhibits holiness is a tremendous witness to the transforming of the Spirit in everyday life.'

The theological education that produces holy men of God and finds that as they speak the Spirit moves, serves well their constituency. The college which does the church well in the 21st century will ever desire even in lecture mode for 'the bush' to burn and for a voice to be heard: '*Take the shoes from your feet, this is holy ground.*' As holy men of yesteryear were moved by the Spirit to give us the Bible, so by the self-same Spirit their descendants are to set their sails to the wind of the same Spirit. Whether you call these

Who can doubt the acumen of the likes of John Stott or Alec Motyer? They were not guilty of entrenching irrelevance: their books will bless a generation of preachers.

Westminster Theological Seminary used to have a requirement in one of its research departments that a thesis could never gain a doctorate unless it was proven to be of value in the market place. It had to be published, it had to sell. Alas, the stipulation has been withdrawn. A recent proposed PhD I looked at here in Scotland indicated that the candidate had given three or four years of his life to research Paul's use of the preposition 'therefore' in the mid-chapters of the Epistle to the Romans. I hope the conclusions in the thesis would not have come as too much of a surprise to Paul! I have less hope that it would have turned the new doctor of philosophy into a physician of the soul.

Distortion of the divine purpose

Some attitudes we bring to Scripture lead to a distortion of the whole divine purpose for depositing the Holy Bible amongst mortal men. I overheard one postgraduate argue that he could never be sure of an accurate exegesis of his text. For such he would need to consult the history and missiological departments to get contextualisation right. He would need to check with the linguistics section to get the syntax right, then he would bring his own skills in systematic theology to get the hermeneutic right – then and only then would he be positioned to exegete the text. On this basis *Every Day with Jesus*, let alone the *Alpha Course*, would never have surfaced and untold millions would be the poorer.

D. M. Lloyd-Jones offers what for some of us is painful advice: 'It would do many of us good to remember that the Epistle to the Romans was primarily written for slaves and ordinary people and *the author expected them to understand it*!' The Bible College movement which succumbs to a new scholasticism or a modern gnosticism which deems to enlighten only the few, is patronising to the

It would do many of us good to remember that the Epistle to the Romans was primarily written for slaves and ordinary people and the author expected them to understand it!

men apostles, prophets or teachers matters little. Badges are unimportant. In the constant delivery of God's transforming truth a theological college fulfils its *raison d'être*. It stands in the 21st century in the tradition of the schools of the prophets established by Samuel, and the group of disciples who learned at the feet of the Lord.

3. There is a refusal to 'entrench irrelevance' and a determination to have a broad base.

By 'entrenching irrelevance' I am referring to 'knowledge for the sake of knowledge'. Art for art's sake transfers to specialism for the sake of specialism. The goal of some scholars is to rise to the top, to be an expert in some minute field, which though honourable in itself, is totally valueless in the broad stream of the Kingdom.

elderly widow with her well-thumbed and underlined Bible from which she has drawn strength all her life, and will not serve the church of the future well.

4. *Our accountability is primarily to our constituency and only secondarily to the university.*

This does not imply intellectual slovenliness or the lowering of standards. It does mean that the validated courses must first be judged not by whether they pass muster with the university, but whether they deliver what the constituency needs. Some theological education has travelled a long way in recent decades. I suffered under the tyranny of the old London BD where if you met up with the Bible it was more by accident than design! In fairness to Ernest Kevan it should be added that internal college courses went some way to filling the gap.

However, history has proven Lloyd-Jones right in declaring that a secular university must not be allowed control over syllabus (an argument which won him few friends when he expounded it at the dedication of London Bible College). Check our quality, yes; the efficiency of our institution, yes; the concern that we give value for money, yes. But the choice must be ours as to what we teach and how we apply it to our constituency (with a built-in accountability factor). Unlike Esau our birthright is not for sale.

5. *The dispensing of theological education should be by practitioners who have continual acquaintance with the field.*

A review of a book on church growth which I read some years ago suggested that the author would do better attempting to build a greenhouse! The reviewer may have lacked both charity and diplomacy. As the adage has it, 'an ounce of practice is worth a ton of theory.' To be able to affirm to a class that you speak from experience is to reveal that you earned your spurs, without which you are ill equipped to lead a posse of followers. An occasional sabbatical spent on the borders of Pakistan and Afghanistan or in an area of urban deprivation might

position the teacher to improve his offering to the taught more than blowing the dust off books hidden away in the shelves of a somewhat Dickensian library in London.

Dangerous people

It has been said of theological institutions and their staff, 'We are dangerous people. Many theologians have been a danger to the church through their erroneous teachings that have corrupted generations of pastors.' But the quote goes on positively to affirm 'but others have had a deeply beneficial impact on world evangelisation through mission vision imparted in intense discipling to students in their seminaries and Bible schools.'¹

You hear me wrongly if you conclude what I share is a brand of anti-intellectualism. Paul and Peter are my mentors: we are to contend earnestly for the faith. We are not obscurantists. Evangelicals must out-think the secularist and the liberal. I stand with John Stott in wishing to promote the best scholarship, and for evangelicals to retake seminaries in Asia and Africa which have embraced liberalism. ICC co-operates with Trusts to achieve this and encourages students into realising the vision. But the basic, overriding goal of evangelical theological education is spiritual formation with a view to communicating with clarity and power the historic faith. If we determine to do this and take cognisance of the warnings referred to earlier, I believe, Wagner's tombstones will prove to be illusory. Our colleges will not be outmoded nor outdated.

The text of an address given to the Baptist Union Assembly Scotland, Glasgow, October 24th 2001 by Dr Tony Sargent, Principal of the International Christian College, Glasgow.

¹ *The Church is Bigger than You Think*, Patrick Johnstone, CFP, p.199

The Christian and the Media

David J B Murie, Broughty Ferry

The famous author Sir James Matthew Barrie wrote many accounts of his family's experiences and traditions from his childhood in Kirriemuir, Angus. Perhaps best known of these is his book *A Window in Thrums*, which if I recall correctly, has as a recurrent theme the observations of the grandmother of the family who, though largely housebound, is able to maintain knowledge of all the happenings in the town by use of a well-located chair by the window looking on to the street. Although she is house-bound, with limited opportunities for contact from visitors, there are few events or controversies of which she is unaware. The book is well-titled, for the window is more than a hole in the wall with a view. It is the means of communication around which her life revolves – her window to the world.

Our window on the world

Here is a question: What is our window on the world? How do we relate to the world? How do we know what is happening in the world around

us? How do we know what to follow or what to avoid and what is or is not fashionable? What to commend and what to castigate? What to esteem and what to eschew? What to espouse and what to oppose? How indeed do we know what to pray for?

Yet another Sunday newspaper has recently been launched in Scotland. It will come as no surprise that many would admit their window to the world is the television, or radio, or newspaper. When it comes to fashion, we might add to that list magazines and the advertisements. Indeed, some of us will have seen a TV commercial promoting BBC Radio Scotland with the slogan: 'In one hour, we can bring you the world.'

The word we might use to lump all these 'windows to the world' into a single category is the 'media'. It touches and impacts all of our lives, possibly much more than we realise. So the deeper question is this: what should our attitude as followers of the Lord Jesus Christ be towards the media? How should we respond to that maze of signals and counter-signals which impinge upon our

consciousness and unconsciousness almost every waking hour of every day?

Undoubtedly this is an immense subject which would need a series of articles in its own right. But it is a question of practical relevance for Christians today, not least for younger people who are going to have to be even more aware of these issues in the future than the older generation has been.

The News

Consider first the news bulletins that make us aware of what is going on in the world. Of course it is good for us to learn of events happening around the world and those issues which profoundly affect our own lives and the lives of other nations. Indeed we rightly consider it part of our Christian duty to have some awareness of what is happening in the global village in which we all live.

Christians should therefore seek out news information and be ready to take some action when and if appropriate. I am thinking of news of tragic and cataclysmic events affecting others, to which we might respond in prayer and

with relief aid. So listening to radio news, watching TV news, or reading of world events in our papers is a commendable activity for believers to engage in.

Two concerns

However there are at least two issues over which we should exercise caution in the way we handle the information that news bulletins give us. The first is this: *Who decides what constitutes news?* Someone has to decide which story gets the headline treatment, or which is to be the major story for the mass-rating mid-evening news bulletin on TV.

Fascination with the sordid

For instance, in recent weeks the lamentable and extremely sordid legal case involving TV personality Michael Barrymore was given top priority on the early evening news bulletins, above all the important and momentous events in our own land and worldwide. That seems to me at least a very odd kind of priority, symptomatic of a set of values not particularly in tune with the values proclaimed by our Lord.

Superficiality

Some readers may have heard recently on the radio the comment by an American TV personality reflecting on the 'world minute', the news priorities of CNN, one of the biggest American news companies. Many will have watched CNN on satellite stations while on in holiday in Europe. Some may even have access to CNN in their homes. The channel broadcasts nothing except international news or topical information every moment of the day. But in the USA, we are told, CNN is different. There, apparently, there is the concept of the 'world minute'. Yes, on the hour, every hour, there is a break from the 59 minutes of domestic news for a 1-minute resumé of international news.

These two examples seem symptomatic of a prioritization that is suspect. Something is out of balance in the presentation of facts we expect to be reported in an unbiased and objective manner. Yet, these are two of the most highly respected news media

worldwide. If they have their priorities wrong, what can we say about the rest?

I wonder how many readers share my second concern with the news which we are fed. *So much of what we are presented with is manifestly 'bad news'*. This aspect of news selection has been termed by one astute observer as 'gray sludge'. It is true that frequently there is a last minute item on the TV news which is a piece of good news, but generally it is the sole item of good news on the whole bulletin. If we took a red and a green marker to one of our newspapers and proceeded to mark green every good news story and red every bad news one, I would be surprised if we had anything approaching an even spreading of the two colours. The red would be on every page compared to the occasional green paragraph tucked away in a corner!

Rare good news

I caught an example of rare good news in a recent gardening programme. A Northern Ireland village was featured which repeatedly entered, and several times won, the Britain in Bloom contest.¹ Over a couple of decades a run-down area characterized by negativity and sectarian graffiti has been transformed by the positive example created by people who got together and systematically set to work changing a culture of despair to one of colour and beauty. The pay-off after many years has not simply been a transformed scenery and a series of awards. It has transcended this, because now an entire generation of children have grown to teenage years in an atmosphere of working together, in an absence of sectarian suspicion, to beautify their surroundings.

One feels that is rather typical of many good news stories which could be featured in our news bulletins but which, alas, never get there.

Does the negative nature of our news media truly reflect the events of the world around us? Are our world affairs really so out of balance between the dishonourable and honourable human activities? Perhaps in the fallen world in which we live

*bad news... has been
termed by one astute
observer as 'gray
sludge'*

that is so, but it does seem more accurate to say that the news imbalance arises from the distorted nature of human priorities.

The preacher's tools

So what can we conclude about our news media as our 'window to the world'? I think we can endorse Karl Barth's enthusiasm that preaching and theology should be done with the Bible in one hand and a newspaper in the other. That is one way in which we can be reminded that sermons need to be kept relevant to today's world and the teaching of Christ and the Bible applied to our situation.

Moreover, that approach should characterize our prayer lives. Do our prayers properly reflect the needs of the world around us, or do we need to confess that too often our prayers echo the 'world minute' of CNN, with a couple of sentences tagged on at the end for world mission? Such praying falls far short of the high priority of the missionary thrust of the Lord's Prayer: *Your will be done in earth as it is in heaven.*

Pervading this use by the Christian of the news media must be an understanding that there is an inbuilt negative bias in the news media and it will always be so. Those who control the media are not those Paul describes *who live according to the pattern we gave you.*² Rather, they are the *many [who] live as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame.*³

A Christocentric perspective

When we think of the media, and the influences around us, we should be mindful of Paul's bugle call in Ephesians 6:12: *For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.*

We must not be surprised that our news bulletins have a warped sense of priorities. Rather must we be aware that they are in fact under the prince

of this world, the author of lies. So it should come as no surprise that the media does not point people towards Christ or provide a particularly church-friendly environment.

Yes, says Paul: *Their mind is on earthly things. But our citizenship is in heaven.* Jesus' teaching (reflected throughout the whole Bible, both Old Testament and New Testament and in particular the Psalms) is full of this 'other citizenship' concept. The Christian's calling is to be in the world but not of this world. Paul again: *Our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Saviour from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control...*⁴

So not only must we as Christians observe the world through the window of the media, but we must observe the media through the window of the Bible, from a Christocentric perspective.

*we must observe the
media through the
window of the Bible*

Engaging the media

There may well be times when we should be prepared to go further: the church should *engage* the media. [God's] *intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, according to his eternal purpose which he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord.*⁵ We should be thankful, therefore, for organizations such as CARE, the Christian Institute and others that have their own Christian media outlets seeking to act as salt of the earth. We may not always agree with everything each Christian organization does, but we should pray for them all and for their important work.

Advertising

I have spent some time on just one aspect of the media because at first sight 'The News' may seem the most innocuous influence the media has upon us. However, if followers of Christ have to be circumspect when receiving news reports, how much more true is it that we need to be careful in our response to other media activities such as advertising,

entertainment, computers and information technology.

Alan Storkey, of Oak Hill College, writes: 'Advertising is the fastest growing form of communication in the world. The average American... watches eighty or so advertisements a day on TV as well as being exposed to hoardings and magazine, newspaper and web advertising... For almost all western people no religious exposure, no political conviction, no educational engagement comes within a tenth of the penetration of consumer advertising into their lives.'⁶

Church advertising

Clearly there is nothing inherently wrong with promoting a product or service. Indeed arguably that is something the church should do more of. It was Christ himself (Matt 5:14) who encouraged his followers to be like a city on a hill which cannot be hidden. If we were to compare with some commercial organization the advertising budget of an average congregation as a proportion of total income, I wonder if we might get a surprise? No doubt we do not want to get ensnared in worldly means to propagate the gospel, but on the other hand we have the duty to proclaim the most precious gift the world can know. Should we not spend wisely and liberally on such a sacred task?

Insidious and spurious

By contrast, what is a matter of deep concern about today's advertising is the

Alan Storkey again: '[Advertising] is backed by the institutionalization of lying. "Thousands of customers are coming back to BT each week." But thousands are also leaving, and we hear less about them. The consumer must be persuaded to buy. But the method of selling is not to present the characteristics of the product, so that a measured choice can be made. Rather, some aspect of faith, meaning or personhood is appropriated to the product or service. Consumption becomes religious, but with a built-in eclecticism. It is epitomized by the T-shirt seller on Oxford Street who on the same stall sells shirts bearing the motif, "Life is football", "Life is a beach", or any other "Life is..." motif which will sell. The question "Is this inconsistent?" is nonsense within this worldview. What will sell becomes the truth. It may be clever marketing but it is a world characterized by falsehood and cynicism.'⁷

Biblical standards

How different from Paul's standards. There are things worth promoting: *whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is admirable – if anything is excellent or praiseworthy – think about such things.*⁸ False advertising is not new! Amos showed us that God hates false advertising! (Amos 8:5) Sellers skimmed the measure and boosted the price, or more poetically in the av, they made *the ephah small* and *the shekel great*. But more so than ever before, today's bulk advertising is of a pervasive, covert, insidious nature.

Again, as followers of Christ we are called to weigh carefully the claims of the advertiser and, if they are false or valueless, to walk away.

Films – TV – Entertainment

Space forbids any careful analysis of the entertainment media. The problems over what to watch and what to avoid are hardly new ones and every family must exercise their own considered censorship to determine what is good and acceptable for that household.

False advertising is not new! Amos showed us that God hates false advertising!

insidious nature and the spurious authority claimed for the product. Adverts that a century ago would have been seen as harmless would be rightly banned now for inaccurate assertions. And yet our media are content to use subversive mechanisms, innuendo and eroticism to promote sales.

Children

Hear one person's concern from times past: 'And shall we just carelessly allow children to hear... tales which may be devised by casual persons, and to receive into their minds ideas for the most part the very opposite of those which we should wish them to have when they are grown up?' Who was the author of these words? It was Plato in 374 BC! But again, the scale of the problem today is absolutely immense. One expert in this field reports that by the age of 18, American children have watched on average no less than 22,000 hours of television."

Family discussions

How frequently or how rarely do parents discuss together with their children the shows on television? If only ministers would encourage parents to discuss with their children the next chart of the top ten TV shows to be screened. How helpful that could be in raising all kinds of moral and behavioural issues which trouble almost every family today! Such a discussion would be the ideal starting point for informal 'situational' teaching of Christian values. Questions could be raised such as: What makes a good show good? Why are some shows objectionable? Can a good show have some objectionable elements? If so, how many? At what point should a show be considered 'off-limits-we-don't-watch-that-rubbish-in-our-house'? Is it possible even to learn good lessons from the bad shows?¹⁰

Computers & IT

Computers and IT are rapidly emerging as the most pervasive of all the media influences. Everything already mentioned about the media applies to computers and information technology, with bells on! Here is what one Christian author said about computers in the dim and distant past of 1989!

The computer's inner world

'Books and computers have a kind of magic; each has the power to draw us

into interior worlds. But those worlds are quite different. Not that the inner world of the computer is bad in itself; indeed, it is an exciting and fascinating world, one of the great achievements of the human imagination... Within this abstract landscape, the computer mentality plays God, seeing itself as the masterful hero in a cosmic morality play where good means making the microworld do its bidding – and bad means losing control... The computer mentality thus severs the connections between mind and brain, language and experience, thought and feeling.

'Some children will come to live in the computer's inner world to the extent that it becomes more real than ordinary life, while others will merely pass through it. None, however, will be unaffected... There is a fine line between regarding the computer as an extension of the mind and regarding the mind as an extension of the computer.'¹¹

Unlockable worlds in the bedroom

In that world of the computer, we find news and information of all varieties, advertising of seemingly endless hidden persuaders, and entertainment that could divert us from all reality. Like the window in Thrums, Microsoft offers us *Windows* as an invitation to observe, to enter, to immerse in worlds accessible from our computer screens. Some of these worlds are real, some are total abstractions, some are good, some are evil, and all are unlockable in an instant from our studies, lounges or bedrooms.

There is a fine line between regarding the computer as an extension of the mind and regarding the mind as an extension of the computer

Conclusion

*How can a young man keep his way pure?
By living according to your word, says the
Psalmist in Psalm 119:9.*

I have attempted the impossible: in 3000 words to touch on subjects which I believe are going to become of increasing importance as an 'edutainment' future unfolds. More so than at any time in the past will it be important to weigh up what we read and what we absorb and to consider it critically in the light of a systematically biblical perspective.

Not that any of this should lead us to despair – quite the opposite. Paul encourages us to *rejoice in the Lord always*, and not to be *anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, to present our requests to God*.¹²

So in conclusion, let us come back to the question I asked at the start of this paper. What is our window to the world? Are we content to make the media our window? Or will we say with the Psalmist: *The entrance of your words gives light; it gives understanding to*

the simple. And Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path.¹³

This article was originally a sermon preached in St James Church, Broughty Ferry on Sunday evening 21 September 2002. It was concluded with the prayer printed below.

Endnotes

- 1 Ed. The reference is to 'Gardener's World' broadcast on BBC 2 on 20th September 2002, and the Gold award was to Broughshane, N. Ireland, as winner in the Large Village classification for Britain in Bloom 2002.
- 2 Philippians 3:17
- 3 Philippians 3:18
- 4 Philippians 3:19f.
- 5 Ephesians 3:10
- 6 Alan Storkey, "Postmodernism Is Consumption", in: Craig Bartholomew & Thorsten Moritz *Christ and Consumerism: Critical reflections on the spirit of our age*,

(Paternoster, Carlisle, 2000) pp. 100-117

7 *Ibid.*

8 Philippians 4:8

9 Rose Pacatte (1996) 'Catechetics and media literacy: Is there a link?' quoted in *Word of Life*, September 2002 (also published on the Web as at 16 Sep. 2002 by the Pauline Center for Media Studies at [www.daughtersofstpaul.com/media_studies/](http://www.daughtersofstpaul.com/media_studies/articlecatecheticmedia.html)

articlecatecheticmedia.html

10 Christian Media Literacy Institute (2001) 'Feel Free to Disagree', in *Newsletter*, Issue 2, October 2002; also publicized on web at www.cml.i.org/Newsletter.2001.10.Iss.2.htm as at 16 Sep. 2002 ; this was also source of the Plato quotation above.

11 A. Emerson & C. Forbes, *The Invasion of the Computer Culture*, (IVP, Leicester, 1989) pp. 166-7.

12 Philippians 4:4

13 Psalm 119: 130, 105.

Prayer

O God, who has given us your precious Word to be a lamp to our feet and a light to our path, grant that it may be so to us. We thank you for the encouragement of Paul's words and example, and for the guidance he gave to the Christians at Philippi, and for its relevance for us today.

Lord, help us to place our entire confidence and trust in your strength and not in the many sights and sounds that besiege us day by day from the media in all its forms. Help us to sift the signals that bombard us, and so guide us by your Word and Holy Spirit that we may be imbued with wisdom to discern what is of value and what is worthless, what should be heeded and what should be discarded, what should be savoured and what should be thrown away.

We pray especially for young people in our culture who, perhaps as never before, are subjected daily to an onslaught of media images and virtual experiences. Help them to find their path in life by exposing everything to the lamp of your Word and embedding the foundation of their lives on that rock which is the light of the world, our risen Lord Jesus Christ.

We pray for those authorities who rule over us; for our Sovereign and her counsellors and governors. May they have wisdom and circumspection.

Abide with each of us, O Lord. While we strive to do right in Christian service, may we rest always upon you, knowing that underneath and all about us are the everlasting arms. Amen.

Inverclachan Old Church

Vacancy Committee Report

The following is a confidential report on several candidates being considered for the vacant charge of Inverclachan Old Church.

Adam: Good man but problems with his wife. Also one reference told of how his wife and he at one time enjoyed walking unclothed in the woods.

Noah: Former pastorate of 120 years with not even one convert. Might lead our congregation into colossal building projects.

Abraham: Though the references reported serious family difficulties, the facts seem to corroborate the rumour that his concern for his own safety resulted in his own wife nearly marrying another man.

Joseph: A big thinker, and an exemplary character, but he believes in dream-interpreting, and has an unfortunately lengthy prison record.

Moses: A modest and meek man, but poor communicator with a serious speech defect. Sometimes he loses his temper and acts rashly. Apparently there was an early report of a murder charge.

David: The most promising leader of all until we discovered he had an affair with his neighbor's wife and ended up being guilty of manslaughter.

Solomon: A great preacher, thinker and writer but our manse could never be adequate for his extravagant life-style, far less accommodate his wives.

Elijah: Mighty preacher and courageous prophet. But prone to

depression and collapses under pressure, needing several months off duty.

Hosea: A tender and loving pastor but our people could never handle his wife's occupation.

Jeremiah: Emotionally unstable, alarmist, negative, always lamenting impending doom. Complete pessimist who is unable to look on the bright side of things.

Isaiah: On the fringe? He claims to have seen angels in church. He has trouble with his language.

Jonah: Refused God's call into ministry until he was forced to obey by getting swallowed by a great fish. He told us the fish later spat him out on the shore near here. We hung up the telephone at that point.

Amos: Too backward and unpolished. With some seminary training he might have promise, but he has a hang-up against wealthy people — he might fit in better in a poorer congregation than ours.

Melchizedek: Great credentials at his current work place, but where does this man come from? No information on his resumé about former work records. Every line about parents was left blank and he refused to supply his date of birth.

John: Says he is a Baptist, but definitely doesn't dress like one. Has slept in the outdoors for months on end, has a weird diet, and provokes denominational leaders to intense anger.

Peter: Too blue-collar. Is far too hot-blooded and even has been known to tell downright lies. He had a big run-in with Paul in Antioch. He can be aggressive, but we suspect he would be a loose cannon.

Paul: Powerful 'Chief Executive Officer' type leader and a fascinating if cerebral preacher. However, he is short

on tact, unforgiving with younger ministers, can appear harsh and has been known to preach all night.

James and John: Package deal of preacher & associate seemed good at first, but found out they have had an ego problem regarding other fellow workers and seating positions. They threatened an entire town after an insult. Also known to try to discourage workers who didn't follow along with them.

Timothy: Far too young! Needs more experience.

Methuselah: Far too old! He's way past his sell-by date!

Jesus: Has had popular times, but once his church grew he managed to offend them all, and then this church dwindled down to a handful. He seldom stays in one place very long. And, of course, he's single.

Judas: His references are good. A steady plodder. Conservative. Good connections. Knows how to handle money. Is street-wise and understands 21st-century culture. We're inviting him to preach this Sunday. There are definite possibilities in this man.

Clerk to the Vacancy Committee

Marriage Lite

The Rise of Cohabitation and its Consequences

Patricia Morgan

Review article by David W Torrance

This important book explodes the myth of cohabitation being a permanent stable relationship equal to marriage. It should be read by every minister, MP and MSP and all who are concerned about the welfare of the family, the stability of society and the good of our nation. It is not an explicitly Christian book in that it is not written from a Christian perspective. It does not mention the teaching of the church or Scripture. Whether or not the author is a Christian or member of any church is not indicated. Nonetheless its conclusions support traditional biblical teaching about the importance of marriage.

Patricia Morgan is a Senior Research Fellow at the Institute for the Study of Civil Society. She is a sociologist specialising

in criminology and family policy. She has authored several books and is a frequent contributor to television and radio programs. I shall offer a number of propositions with brief comments drawn from the book.

Recent research into Co-habitation

This book provides information not previously available about cohabiting lifestyles. Surveys over a twenty-year period have been conducted in nineteen countries, which include the UK, Europe, Scandinavia, America and the white Commonwealth. Results vary from country to country but generally not to any great extent. General patterns emerge and it is possible to draw some important and, for some, surprising conclusions, which were neither possible nor available at an earlier stage, concerning

a cohabiting lifestyle and its consequences. Far from being a mirror image of marriage, cohabitation is in fact something quite different.

Cohabiting relationships have neither the stability nor permanency of marriage.

They are far more fragile and regardless of age or income, are more liable than marriage to fracture. In the UK, of those which do not convert to marriage only 18 per cent endure for ten years. The reason for their fragility is largely dependent on the attitude of the cohabitantes. They do not enter in to the partnership with the same commitment as their married counterparts.

Cohabitation has become the dominant mode of first partnership.

Those going directly into marriage today are 21 per cent. More than a third of first cohabiting partnerships founder... As long-term cohabitations are rare, and since cohabitations break up at a higher and faster rate than

marriages, this leaves more people 'unpartnered'.

Cohabitation does not lessen the frequency of divorce.

Research findings in the UK indicate that cohabitation prior to marriage can lead to higher rates of dissolution, varying from 30% to 50%. 'In Canada, premarital cohabitants also have over twice the risk of divorce in any year of marriage compared to non-cohabitants'.

Cohabitations with children are also much more fragile than marriages.

'A study of dissolution rates for 4,000 Swedish couples with one child found that, on average, cohabiting parents were three times more likely to break up than comparable married couples.' Figures for the UK are approximately the same. Cohabitations with one or more children are also more likely to dissolve eventually, compared to childless cohabitations. Figures are quite startling in that, 'less than one in ten British women having their first child in cohabitation are still cohabiting ten years on, or only 8.7 per cent'!

When in cohabitation a woman becomes a mother, this actually reduces the chances of her marrying the father by 67 per cent.

This is because many men who cohabit feel that, with the arrival of a child, their independence is threatened. They lack the commitment to becoming a father. Cohabitation has become a major route into lone parenthood.

Cohabiting couples who have children and then marry are also more likely to divorce than couples who have children within marriage.

Cohabitations are not a helpful way to parenthood. They are a major cause of the rise in numbers of people ultimately living alone.

Marriage engenders a 'higher degree of investment in the parental relationship'.

In the UK formerly married fathers in 68 per cent of cases provide income transfers to the mother of their children (where the mother had not remarried or begun cohabiting with

another man). This compares to approx. 16 per cent of the former cohabitant fathers, and what they provide is generally considerably less than that provided by formerly married fathers. Much the same is true of continued, committed contact with the children. 'Marriage strengthens the children's claim to the economic resources and social capital of both their parents – even when it is ended.'

Surveys have also been undertaken concerning the quality of relationships.

In every case cohabitants, particularly if there are no plans to marry, are less happy with their relationships. There are more frequent quarrels, and domestic violence is higher and more severe among cohabitants than among the married. Furthermore, marriages preceded by long cohabitations (i.e. two years or more) are particularly characterized by low marital quality and have a higher perceived likelihood of divorce.

There is considerable evidence to show that marriage is a 'healthy environment' associated with lower mortality and morbidity.

Divorce and widowhood of cohabitees lead to greater psychiatric illness and a reduced life span than for those who are happily married. Cohabitations, with their inferior quality of relationships, do not confer the same advantages in terms of health. According to surveys in the US, cohabitants report significantly more depression, three times more than among married couples, and nearly three times more alcohol problems than the married.

Marriage influences men in the labour market.

Married men generally manifest greater involvement and success than do single men or men who are cohabiting.

Another issue is that of faithfulness.

In the UK 43 per cent of cohabiting men have reported being faithful to their partners in a five-year period, compared with nearly 90 per cent of married men. Indeed, 24 per cent of cohabiting men reported running two or more relationships at the same time!

Data from a US survey of 1,235 women in relationships in 1991 show how 20 per cent of women of the cohabiting women cheated on their partners, as opposed to only four per cent of the married women.

There is a higher rejection of parenthood by cohabitants compared to married people.

Abortions are around four times more frequent with pregnancies involving cohabiting rather than married women.

The outcome for children of cohabiting couples

Research in this area is not so great as research on the outcome for the couples themselves. Nonetheless from the surveys available, a number of disturbing issues do emerge.

Neglect and abuse

Neglect and abuse is particularly associated with the presence of new 'partners' of the mother. Step-fathers, or 'live-in' and visiting boyfriends constitute the most powerful risk factor for child maltreatment. According to one study, 'the rate of severe abuse was 14 times higher for a child living alone with a biological mother than in a biological married family; 20 times more likely where the child was living with cohabiting biological parents and 33 times higher where the mother was cohabiting with a man who was not the biological father.'

With regard to education

Children of married couples are significantly more likely to do well at school, in academic and social terms, than those of cohabiting heterosexual and homosexual couples.

Delinquency

Delinquency is more frequent among children from cohabiting couples. In one survey, nearly three-quarters of the children who committed criminal offences were those of cohabiting couples and just over one-quarter were children of married couples. Children of cohabiting couples also appear in larger proportions than children of married couples among those who

have used illicit drugs, begun drinking alcohol earlier in life and abuse alcohol.

Mental health

In regard to mental health, a survey in the UK carried out on behalf of the Department of Health, found that children living with cohabiting couples were 50 per cent more likely to have a mental health problem, as distinct from those of married couples. Again, there is an increase in mental health problems among children from broken homes. Families underpinned by lifelong commitment in marriage provide the most stable and enduring environment in which children can grow: emotionally, physically, mentally and intellectually.

Future marital instability

One survey concerning marital instability over the Life Course, indicates that couples cohabiting increased the chances that their offspring cohabited prior to, or instead of marriage. It also indicated that, mothers' full-time employment increased the likelihood of relationship dissolution by 131 per cent for both sons and daughters, and their married daughters divorcing by 166 per cent!

According to the various surveys cohabitation offers no positive contribution to marriage.

Multiple cohabiting, where one or both partners have had experience with cohabitation, is a strong predictor of the failure of future relationships and an increased likelihood of divorce. Those who have experienced one partnership breakdown have a higher risk of experiencing the dissolution of a subsequent partnership.

Happily married couples report that commitment is one of the most important factors in the success of their marriage.

Implications of cohabitation and marriage

The final four chapters explore at greater depth the meaning and implications of cohabitation and marriage.

Marriage and cohabitation are not comparable.

Marriage and cohabitation are not the same and are not comparable, although there is much pressure from all sides, not least from government circles to regard them as equal.

Cohabitation is marked by less commitment.

Cohabitation in contrast to marriage is marked by less commitment within unions of men and women to each other and to their relationship as an enduring unit, in exchange, as is supposed, for more freedom, particularly for men.

Marriage takes place as a public act before family and friends.

Marriage involves depth of commitment on the part of two people, and the promise to love and care for each other for life. It involves helpful constraints, and offers stability, security and a lasting happiness, which those who cohabit desire but cannot obtain.

For marriage cohabitation is 'far more threatening as an institution than mere promiscuity could ever be...'

Cohabitation apes marriage and thus creates the external appearance of a union of lives without creating the internal, moral, legal, or emotional reality of such a union. The result is highly destabilizing not just for marriage as an institution, but for the young men and women who mistake a substitute for the real thing.

Alternatives to marriage weaken the institution of marriage.

Furthermore, as the alternatives to marriage are strengthened, so the institution of marriage is progressively weakened. This undermines the only institution ever shown to be capable of raising children successfully. The collapse of marriage means growing family instability, declining investment in children and consequently to more men and women living alone. It also undermines society.

Conclusion

Marriage today has sadly lost the support of government and is

neglected and discredited in the media. There is vast ignorance about the meaning, implication and far-reaching effects of cohabitation, for those involved and for the whole of society. Revitalizing marriage requires considerable re-education of society, and the elimination of the anti-marriage bias currently prevalent in school curricula. We need to make the information provided in this book widely known. We are immensely indebted to Patricia Morgan.

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The Good Samaritan

Sermon by Martin Luther

Luke 10:23-37

First, the evangelist says that Christ took his disciples aside and said to them secretly, 'Blessed are the eyes which see the things that you see: for I tell you that many prophets and kings have desired to see those things which you see, and have not seen them; and to hear those things which you hear, and have not heard them.' To see and hear is to be understood simply of outward seeing and hearing; that is they saw Christ come in the flesh, heard his sermons and were present at those miracles that he did. The Jews saw according to the flesh, and heard likewise; yet they did not truly acknowledge him as Christ, as the apostles did, especially Peter, who in the name of the rest confessed: 'You are Christ, Son of the living God.' We grant, indeed, that there were some among the Jews who acknowledged him, but the number of them was very small. That is why he took his apostles apart to himself.

Preaching the Law

Many prophets and kings saw Christ in the Spirit as the Lord himself said concerning Abraham, 'Your father

Abraham rejoiced to see my day and he saw it and was glad' (John 8:56). The Jews thought that he spoke of bodily seeing; but he spoke of spiritual seeing, by which all believing Christian hearts saw him before he was born. Although this Spirit-inspired seeing saved the holy fathers and prophets, yet they always with inward and zealous affection desired to see Christ in the flesh, as is plainly shown in the prophets. That is why the Lord says to his disciples, who saw him both in the flesh and in the spirit, 'Blessed are the eyes which see the things which you see.' It is as if he had said: now is the acceptable year and time of grace; the matter is so weighty and precious that the eyes that see it are said to be blessed.

Now the gospel was preached openly and clearly both by Christ and his apostles. So he here calls all blessed who both see and hear such grace as I have preached a long time to you. I would to God that you keep that which I have spoken fresh in memory.

A hard lesson

When the Lord spoke these things, a certain lawyer stood up, showing

himself as he thought, to be some great one who, tempting the Lord, says. 'Master, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?' This lawyer was not unskillful in the Scriptures, which even his answer shows. Yet here he is proved a fool. He is brought to shame as Christ takes away all his glorying in one word. Believing he had observed the whole law and that he was a chief one, with respect to others as undoubtedly he was, he thought himself sufficiently worthy by reason of his godliness and learning to carry on such a conversation with the Lord.

What does the Lord do in this case? The following text declares: 'He said to him, What is written in the law? How do you read it? He answered, You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength and with all your mind, and your neighbour as yourself. Then he said to him, You have answered correctly; do this and you will live.' I think the Lord gave this good man a hard lesson; he deals very plainly with him, and puts him to shame openly. He proves that he who thought that he had done all had done nothing.

All our love

If I had time, many things might be said about the two commandments. They are the chief and greatest commandments in Moses, on which all the law and prophets hang, as Christ himself says in Matthew. If we consider the commandments of Moses, we find that they have to do with love. This commandment, 'You shall have no other gods before me,' we cannot declare or interpret in any other way than this: You must love God alone. So Moses expounded, where he says, 'Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God is one Lord: and you shall love the Lord thy God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might' (Deut.6:4,5) from which the lawyer got his answer. But the Jews think this commandment extends no further than that they should not set up or worship idols. And if they can say and witness that they have only one God, and worship none but him, they think they have observed this commandment. In the same way this lawyer understood it, but that was an evil and wrong understanding.

We must otherwise consider and understand this precept, 'You shall have no other gods before me.' You, it says – all that you are, especially all your heart, soul and strength. It speaks not of the tongue, nor the hand or knees, but of the whole person, whatever you are and have. For no other god to be worshipped by me, it is necessary that I have the true and only God in my heart. That is, I must love him from my heart, so that I always depend on him, trust in him, place my hope in him, have my pleasure, love and joy in him, and daily remember him. If we take pleasure in anything, we say, 'It does me good in my heart,' and if anyone speaks, or laughs, and does not mean it from his heart, we are apt to say, 'He speaks or laughs, indeed, but it does not come from the heart.' The love of the heart in Scripture signifies a vehement and special love that we ought to have toward God. They who serve God with mouth, hands and knees only, are hypocrites, and God

They who serve God with mouth, hands and knees only, are hypocrites, and God will not accept them because he will not have part, but the whole

will not accept them because he will not have part, but the whole.

Outward glory

The Jews outwardly abstained from idolatry, and served God alone in word; but their hearts were far from him, being full of diffidence and unbelief. Outwardly they seemed to be very earnest in serving God, but within they were full of idolatry. So the Lord said unto them, 'Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! You are like white-washed sepulchres, which appear beautiful outwardly, but within are full of dead men's bones and putrefaction. Even so you outwardly appear righteous to men, but within you are full of hypocrisy and iniquity' (Matt.23:37). These are those wicked ones who glory in the outward thing, who go about to justify and make themselves good by their own works, as does this lawyer.

Consider how great was the pride of this man; he appears as though he could neither be blessed nor rebuked by the Lord. It seemed to him that the Lord would publicly commend and praise his life. He was not thinking about learning anything from the Lord. He would willingly have had Christ praise him and all the eyes be turned on him bent to admire him. So all hypocrites outwardly lay claim to excellent, great and weighty works.

Two levels of love

Many say that they want neither glory nor praise, but in their hearts they are full of ambition, and wish their holiness were known to everyone. All those who most grievously offend against the first commandment are like this lawyer. They think that God is to be loved no more than by mere words and mere words fulfill the law. The

commandment therefore remains in their mouth, and floats above the heart but does not pierce it. I must go further; I must so love God that I can be content to forsake all for his sake, and if required, my body and life: I must love him above all things, for he is jealous, and cannot allow anything to be loved above him. But under him he permits us to love anything. A husband allows his wife to love her maids, her household things and such like, yet not to love anything with that love wherewith she is bound to him, but will have her leave all such things for his sake. Likewise the wife requires the same of her husband. In the same manner, God allows us to love his creatures since they are created and are good.

Loving with the heart

The sun, gold and silver, and whatever by nature is pleasant, procures our love, making it dear to us; God is not offended at that. But he does not allow me to cleave to something, and love it equally with him. Indeed, God may ask me to deny and forsake all these things, and to be content even if I never see the sun, money or riches. The love of the creature must be far inferior to the love of the Creator. He, the Sovereign, insists that I love him above all other things. You see now what it is to love God with all the heart, with all the soul and with all the mind. To love God with all the heart is to love him above all; although creature comforts are very dear to me and bring me great delight, yet I must be willing to forsake them if my Lord requires it of me.

Loving with soul, strength, mind

To love God with all the soul is to give up our whole life and body at his

Whatever I have and am, I will give up, but him I will not forsake

pleasure; so that if the love of the creature or any creature or any temptation assail us, we may say, I had rather part with all these than forsake my God, whether he cast me off, or destroy me, or whatever through his permission shall come upon me. Whatever I have and am, I will give up, but him I will not forsake.

The soul, in the Scriptures, signifies the life of the body and whatever is done by our senses such as eating, drinking, sleeping, waking, seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting. To love God with all the strength is, for his cause, to renounce all the members and limbs of the body, so that one will expose to peril both flesh and body, before he will commit that which is unjust against God. To love God with all the mind is to do nothing but what will please him.

The law makes us sinners

You perceive now what is contained in this commandment of God. You, he says – not just your hands, mouth and knees alone, but every part of you. They who do these things truly fulfill it. But no one on earth does so; we all do otherwise. Thus the law makes us all sinners. The most holy in this world do not so much fulfil the least jot. No one cleaves with all his heart to God, far less leaves all things for his sake.

How can we love God when his will is not fixed in our mind? If I love God, I cannot but love his will also. But if God wills to send sickness, poverty and ignominy, we murmur; we bear it impatiently. Like this Pharisee and lawyer, we lead an honest life outwardly. We worship and serve God, we fast, pray and behave ourselves in outward appearance. But God does not require that of us; he wants us to bend our wills to do his will with pleasure

and love, cheerfully and lovingly. Whatever the Lord says to the lawyer, he says to us all. All of us are therefore guilty of death and subject to Satan. All of us are liars, proud and filthy; whatever we pretend, it is worthless. We are wise in worldly matters, we scrape together money and goods, we speak pleasantly before men, and cunningly set forth our case. What does God care about these things? He requires us to love him with our whole heart, which none of us are able to do.

Preaching the gospel

Having discussed the former part of the text, namely, the preaching of the law, now follows the other part, which is the preaching of the gospel which declares how we may fulfill the law, and how fulfilling takes place, which we learn from the Samaritan.

What does the lawyer do after the Lord had thus dealt with him? Willing to justify himself, he asked the Lord, 'Who is my neighbour?' He did not ask, 'Who is my God?' It is as if he said, 'I owe nothing to God, neither do I want anything of him. It seems to me I owe nothing to anyone; nevertheless, I would like to know who is my neighbour.' The Lord answering him, uses a powerful example in which he declares that we are all neighbours one to another – both the one who gives a benefit and the one who needs one – although by the text it appears that he only is a neighbour who bestows a benefit on another. But the Scripture sometimes calls him our neighbour who bestows a benefit, and sometimes the one who receives it.

'Go and do likewise.' The lawyer had offended not only God but also man, and was destitute of love both of God and neighbour. This wretched

man is brought into such a situation that he is found to be altogether evil from head to toe. How is it that being so skillful in the Scripture, he was not aware of this? He led a hypocritical and counterfeit life, without regard to helping others but seeking only honour before men. He thought by negligent living to get to heaven.

You have often heard from me that the Christian life deals with faith and the heart in things that pertain to God, and labour in life and words for our neighbours. Nor must we wait until our neighbour requires something of us; it is our duty to prevent his asking, and of our own accord offer our liberality to him.

The Samaritan is Christ

The Samaritan is without doubt our Lord Jesus Christ, who has declared his love toward God and man. Toward God, in being made incarnate and fulfilling the will of his Father. Toward man, when, after baptism, he began to preach, work miracles and heal the sick. Nothing he did concerned himself only, but all was directed toward his neighbours. He became our Servant though he is above all and equal with God. But he did all these things knowing they pleased God. When he had fulfilled the commandment in loving God with all his heart, he committed his life and whatever he had to the will of his Father, saying: 'Father, all I have is yours; for thy sake I surrender the glory and honour which I have had among men, that the world may know how much I love you.'

He is the Samaritan, who, without being asked, came and fulfilled the law. He alone fulfilled it. That praise none can take from him. He alone deserved it, and to him alone it applies. He, being touched with pity, has compassion on the wounded man, binds up his wounds, brings him to an inn, and provides for him.

The man who lies wounded, beaten, spoiled and half dead, is Adam; and that means us. The thieves which wounded and left us in this deplorable situation are the devils. We are not able

to help ourselves; should we be left in this situation, we would die; our wounds would become festered, our afflictions exceedingly great.

Our utter helplessness

This excellent parable is set before us to show us what we are, and weakness of our reason and free will. If that wretched man had attempted to help himself, his case would have been made worse; he would have hurt himself, opening his wounds anew by exertion, so falling into greater calamity. If he had been left without assistance, his case would have been the same. So it is when we are left to ourselves; our efforts and endeavors amount to nothing.

Numerous ways and different means have been invented to amend our lives and get to heaven. But self-flagellation, indulgences, pilgrimages and so forth, have always made the state of Christianity worse. This is the world, which is represented by this wounded man: he being laden with sins, under a heavy burden and unable to help himself.

The powerlessness of the law

But the Samaritan who fulfilled the law is perfectly sound and whole. He does more than either the priest or Levite. He binds up his wounds, pours in oil and wine. He sets him upon his own beast and brings him to an inn. He makes provisions for him, and, when he departs, diligently commends him to the host, and leaves with him sufficient to pay his expenses. None of this either the priest or Levite did. By the priest is signified the holy fathers who flourished before Moses; the Levite represents the priesthood of the Old Testament. All these could do nothing by their works, but passed by like the priest and Levite. Therefore, though I had all the good works of Noah, Abraham and all the faithful, they would profit me nothing.

The priest and Levite saw the miserable man but could not help him or give him any remedy. The patriarchs saw men plunged in sin; they felt the anguish of it, but they could make the

case no better. These were the preachers of the law, who showed that the world is full of sin, and lies half dead, unable to help itself in its futile thinking.

The sweetness of grace

But Christ is that true Samaritan, who is moved by our misery: he binds up our wounds, and pours in oil and wine which is the pure gospel. He pours in oil when grace is preached. When it is declared: 'O miserable man, this is your unbelief and your condemnation; you are wounded and sick. But I will show you a remedy. Join yourself to

*the Lord Jesus
Christ condescends
to be the one who
carries us upon his
shoulders*

this Samaritan, Christ the Saviour; he will help and aid you.'

The nature of oil, as we know, is to mollify. So the sweet and gentle preaching of the gospel makes the heart soft and tender toward God and our neighbours. Sharp wine signifies the cross of affliction and discipleship: there is no cause for a Christian to seek the cross, for it very soon hangs over his head. As Paul witnesses: 'All who will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution' (2 Tim.3:12). This is the emblem and badge of this King. Those ashamed of it do not belong to him. Moreover, the Lord Jesus Christ condescends to be the one who carries us upon his shoulders. There is scarce a more lovely and comforting passage in the whole Scripture than that where Christ compares himself to a shepherd, who carries home on his shoulders the lost sheep to the fold. We believers must remain for a short time in the inn of this world. As the innkeeper cared

for the man, so the ministers of the gospel have care of us.

True ministers of Christ

This is the sum of the passage: the kingdom of Christ is a kingdom of mercy and grace; Christ bears our defects and infirmities; he takes our sins upon himself bearing them willingly; daily we are supported by him. He does not grow weary of carrying us. It is the duty of the preachers of his kingdom to comfort consciences, to handle them gently, to feed them with the gospel, to bear the weak, to heal the sick; they ought fitly to apply the Word according to the need of everyone.

This is the duty of a faithful preacher: to behave himself as a healer of the sick, who deals very tenderly with them, uttering very loving words, talking gently, and making every effort to do them good. A minister ought to consider his parish as a hospital, in which are such as are afflicted with different kinds of disease. If Christ be thus preached, faith and love come together, and fulfill the commandment of love.

Grief Support Group Dynamics

Bill Webster

In previous articles, Bill Webster has suggested a framework for understanding grief, and a rationale for a grief support ministry. Here, in his final article, he offers some practical suggestions on grief support group dynamics, leadership and basic counselling skills.

Much has been written in social psychology on the behavior of groups, the importance of cohesiveness, and the dynamics that affect people when they come together. There is often a progression in the development of every group which can be described in four simple terms; *Forming, Norming, Storming, and Performing*, and I have observed these dynamics at work in a variety of situations. Each group has a life of its own. While acknowledging that some groups may develop differently from others, the following general outline may be useful.

Stage 1. Explanation: Setting people at ease.

The facilitator of a grief support programme faces one major obstacle

before the group even begins. It is this: *The participant does not want to be there!*

Given a choice, they would rather be anywhere else than at this group, for to be at a grief support group means acknowledging you have lost someone special. So people resist being at the group just as they resist the idea that someone has died and they have been left.

Understanding this dynamic is the first key to a successful group

Place yourself in the participant's position. You'd rather not be there, your feelings are unwelcome, you're confronted by the last topic in the world you want to be considering. Someone begins to talk. If you are honest, you're not really in a receptive mode, are you? So what can the leader say or do to break down this understandable resistance?

Some questions the participant may be asking before and after the beginning of the first meeting might be:

1. Why am I here?
2. What is going to happen here?
3. Who else is here?
4. What is going to be asked of me?

5. Can I trust these people and say what I really think?

6. Will others understand if I cry or appear weak?

7. Am I safe here?

8. Who's in charge, and will he/she know what I'm going through?

How you answer these questions in the mind of the participant will determine the success of the group. Think carefully about these first moments because this is the most important time of the entire group process. Place yourself in the position of the participants, and ask what would set you at ease and encourage you to stay, even before you decide whether you would participate.

Whatever we say, I believe we need to address six vital issues:

1. Validation of the feelings of grief.
2. Identification with the leaders and the participants.
3. Commendation of the courage it has taken to come.
4. Affirmation of the grief process.
5. In contrast, the expectations of our culture, however unrealistic.
6. Anticipation, telling them a little of what to expect.

One of the most effective ways to do this is to tell one's own personal story of loss, or have someone else share theirs. Discovering the leaders have been through bereavement helps set people at ease. Identification helps create the fellowship of sufferings, and suggests, 'If they can survive, so can I.' When the leader has shared, others are encouraged to begin sharing their grief experiences.

Some counsellors feel self-disclosure is not wise, but in this field of grief support I disagree. Admittedly, talking about oneself can be dangerous and unhelpful. But here is an important distinction. If a leader is telling his story for his own sake, then that may not be supportive. But sharing one's experiences to validate someone else's is different. The method, however, is subject to constant self-examination and honest assessment of one's personal motives.

Stage 2. Exploration: Testing the waters.

When the participants have learned what to expect, are feeling more comfortable and secure, and now begin to tentatively share in the group, the stage of exploration has begun.

the group has helped its members to see the grief journey doesn't have to be travelled alone

Because there is still some apprehension and group members are getting to know each other, the sharing may still be superficial. Some have a tendency to try to 'outdo' one another in terms of grief and their depths of loss; they may well be testing to see if it is safe to risk moving to a deeper level of self-disclosure.

During this second stage, to help facilitate discussion around the person who has died, you might suggest bringing in a photograph or a significant article that will focus the conversation. The key is to try to encourage people to risk going beneath the surface and sharing deeper feelings with others in the group.

Stage 3. Expression: Where the rubber meets the road.

After a few meetings, the group begins to take on a life of its own. People are no longer asking 'why' we are here, and are appreciating being part of a group. They look forward to the meetings and begin to acknowledge how important the process is to them. With this shift comes an opportunity for the leader to help them move into the pain of grief and explore the personal implications of what this loss means for them. This stage may be more intense because now 'grief work' is being done.

By now, also, other dynamics may be in play. The leadership role often changes. First, group members may be working actively to help themselves and second, may also be offering support to one another. In a sense the group begins to set its own agenda. This is a wonderful dynamic, and it is a sign of good leadership not to feel threatened by this development, but to encourage it.

However, some conflicts or problems may be emerging. Sometimes family members bring their tensions into the group, and use the opportunity to score points over one another. Other times participants may

bring their own agenda to the group but that agenda is not focused on the goals: someone wants to be the dispenser of advice; someone else has read this book, or seen that video and wants to let people admire their knowledge; yet another sees grief as a 'lack of faith' and wants to quote Scripture; someone else is so taken up with her own situation that she doesn't want to listen to others and constantly interrupts with her own story or minimises the validity of someone else's; someone tries to outdo the other by saying, 'You think you've got it bad, let me tell you what happened to me.'

The leader's challenge now is to keep things on track, facilitate the participation of all members and

encourage the group to be more sensitive to others.

Stage 4. Expansion: Beyond grief to a new life.

Participants are now reaching out to each other for help and encouragement. They feel at home in the group, and share more easily. The agendas you have set for the meetings will be more flexible as specific needs or issues are raised. You may have to set aside one issue, because the need is for open discussion. In this stage, sensitivity and perception is your priority.

People now know one another and will ask, 'Where is Mary tonight?' and someone may volunteer to phone and make sure all is well. Also by this phase the focus has shifted from the pain of grief to the possibility of recovery. There's more hope, and the tasks of adjustment are proceeding. That doesn't mean there is no pain; rather it is no longer all-consuming. Though the grief journey is a personal thing, the group has helped its members to see it doesn't have to be travelled alone.

Stage 5. Expedition: The journey continues.

The support and sharing such a community offers will bring people close together. Thus, when the time comes for separation, care must be given to the task of closure, so that members do not find themselves grieving another loss.

In my model of ministry, meetings do not end after the initial weeks of support. Monthly follow-up meetings provide ongoing assistance for those who choose to continue. This is to wean people from the group. As this follow-up programme proceeds, some drop out as they feel ready, most often at Christmas, or summer break. When a 'Memorial Service' or other method of closure is held, this often gives those grieving 'permission' to move on.

Leadership

Grief group leaders are really facilitators. Facilitation according to the dictionary is 'the means that renders anything readily possible'. The task of the facilitator, then, is to

develop the means whereby grief support happens.

At one time, social scientists searched for characteristics that distinguished leaders from followers. While no single 'leadership trait' has been identified, there are several characteristics that are more typical of leaders: originality, initiative, vigour and persistence, a drive for responsibility, self-confidence, willingness to accept consequences, ability to tolerate stress and frustration, the ability to influence, the capacity to structure tasks.

The Effective Grief Support Facilitator

Who should be the facilitator of a grief support programme?

The one who is more willing: to listen than to talk, to learn than to instruct, to accept than to judge, to walk alongside than to lead, to ask questions than to give answers, to show warmth than to maintain distance, to show patience than to hurry, to be flexible than to keep to his own agenda, to give long-term support than to offer a quick fix, to let go than to hold on when the task is done.

The facilitator must be: more interested in others than in self, more interested in the mourner's feelings than his own feelings.

Facilitators need not be mental health professionals. While acknowledging that grief can trigger mental health challenges, grief is not a disease and should not be labelled as such. Facilitators come from a variety of backgrounds and experiences. Every facilitator will, however, have several qualifications.

Education: A facilitator will understand the issues, know how grief affects individuals, and have developed strategies by which people can receive help. There is no substitute for sound instruction and hence understanding.

Experience: A facilitator will have experienced the loss of someone significant. Some might argue this point, but when people come to a support group, they want to know if anyone understands what they are

experiencing. The underlying question is, 'What do you know about this?'

Both elements, however, are essential. Experience does not automatically make someone an expert. As T. S. Eliot put it: 'We can have the experience, but miss the meaning.' Unless we have worked through the experience and understood the dynamics that were in play, we may miss the meaning of the experience.

Facilitators should be chosen: Asking for volunteers may produce more (or less) than you bargained for! The effective facilitator may not be the most obvious, most vocal, or even most willing. *Look for the person to whom others turn in times of crisis.* Gifts of caring and perceptive sensitivity are more important than communication skills. A sense of vocation is needed.

Developing Basic Skills

1. Be a good listener.

One of the biggest mistakes we make with grieving people is not listening enough. Some feel their problem is not knowing what to say. The real

This quality of listening has to be developed.

2. Evaluate the person's level of need.

As you listen, be discerning. What is the loss that the person has suffered? What is missing from their lives? What will some of the adjustments be? Seek to assess the person's level of need. Every loss is difficult. Is the person functioning? Is this situation one requiring professional help? Most of the situations we encounter in grief support are difficult, but manageable. The need is to learn how to cope with these and how to handle more complicated situations.

3. Accept people as they are.

Grieving people are often wounded people. They may find themselves feeling many uncharacteristic emotions and behaving unusually. But that may not be their biggest problem. Sometimes their friends and family respond by saying 'You've got to pull yourself together; how on earth did you get yourself into a mess like this? Be strong!' So the grieving person feels even worse and guilty that she is not living up to expectations.

4. Empathise with hurt feelings.

Experience does not automatically make someone an expert

issue is allowing the grieving person to talk. One of the most useful ways to communicate care and concern is to listen intently and attentively. Paul Tournier says, 'It is impossible to overemphasise the immense need human beings have to be listened to. In most conversations, although there is a good deal of talk, there is not real listening; such conversations are no more than a dialogue of the deaf.'

Don't fall into the trap of giving answers before you have properly understood the question. 'Hearing captures the words a person speaks; listening captures the meaning and the feeling that lies beneath those words.' Listening is not thinking about what you are going to say when the other person stops talking.

Until we know how the person feels, we are merely standing on the doorstep of their life instead of sitting in the living room. The word 'empathy' means 'to enter into a person's feelings so that you feel as they feel, look at life through their eyes, and imaginatively experience their experiences'. To empathise means to put oneself in someone's shoes. As someone involved in grief support, the challenge is not to find answers, but to identify with the hurt feelings being described.

Someone might say, 'I feel so guilty'. Never say, 'You shouldn't feel that way', because they do feel guilty. The feeling is legitimate, even if the guilt is not. So ask 'Why is this person feeling this emotion?' The ability to identify and

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validate people's feelings enables them to feel a little more understood.

5. Wise Use of Questions

Ask open-ended questions. Avoid questions that can be answered with a simple yes or no. For example; if you ask, 'Do you miss him?' they'll respond, 'Yes'. The conversation goes nowhere. A better way is to ask, 'What do you miss most about him?' Have a list of questions, for example, 'Tell me how you first met her', 'What is your fondest memory?', 'What was it that made her special?'. You need open questions to elicit a good response.

Eye contact is important. We use our eyes to communicate feelings; they widen in surprise, they narrow in suspicion. Some people can silence us with a look. Many grieving people notice others feel uncomfortable because they avoid eye contact.

Gestures are an important component of body language. Perhaps the following few suggestions will be helpful as a preliminary consideration. Try to maintain eye contact but be careful not to stare. Nod your head in agreement or as a sign of understanding. Lean slightly towards the person when you talk. Don't cross your arms or legs which can be seen as a sign of defensiveness. Maintain an appropriate distance. Don't push the Kleenex when someone starts to cry – when tears come best to say nothing and allow the person to feel and express their emotion.

6. Know when you are out of your depth

As much as you would like to help every person who is hurting, it simply is not possible. One of the signs of a wise care-giver is recognising one's own limitations. One of the most significant ways we can help people is by referring them to someone better equipped to help. This is not a sign of failure but a recognition that we cannot solve every problem.

Maintain a list of professionals to whom you can confidently refer people: A marriage and family therapist; a psychiatrist; a lawyer; an

(continued on page 26)

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(cont. from page 16)

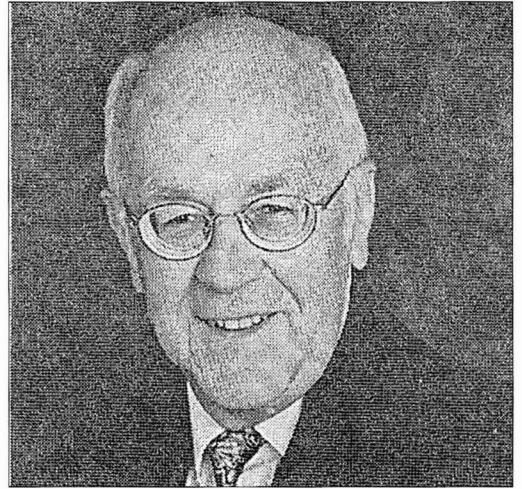
accountant; a financial advisor. Be ready to encourage a person to consult their doctor. Yet assure them of your ongoing support throughout their grief process, and people will feel secure in that support.

References:

P Tournier, *Guilt and Grace*, Harper and Row, p 189.

For a full list of Dr Webster's resources, check

<<http://www.griefjourney.com/>>



Ann Allen meets Bruce Milne

It's fascinating to interview someone you know well and uncover gems of knowledge about them in the process.

The Reverend Doctor Bruce Milne has long been a dear friend of ours and indeed many aeons ago as a student at St Andrews University had been instrumental in my husband's conversion. Bruce has spent much of this past summer ministering in Britain, delivering the Bible Readings at the Keswick Convention and preaching during Shetland's Bible Week. Over the summer he also worked in New College library finalising the script for his latest book which deals with heaven and hell and will be part of The Bible Speaks Today series when it is published later this year. It was in a quiet moment snatched from all that busyness that we talked together.

Ann: Hell, if not heaven, has grabbed the headlines in the

Church of Scotland press recently! What does your latest book have to offer on that subject Bruce?

Bruce: I hope the book will help God's people recover clear convictions concerning the doctrine of heaven and hell since what we believe and understand about these issues has massive implications for the mission and message of the church and for the conduct of our own lives.

Ann: I'm sure we can all think of someone who would benefit from reading it! Writing has featured throughout your ministry but primarily your vocation has been to preach and teach the word. How did that call crystallise for you?

Bruce: I'm one of those who prove the statistic that most people come to Christ in their teens. It was during an old-fashioned crusade evangelistic outreach with Dr Eric Hutchings in my home town of Dundee that I came to faith, realising that I was lost and needed Christ. Then, as a new very young convert, I found myself on a team in Shetland with DP Thompson,

sharing Christ with others. As I preached there for the first time, before the sermon was over, something happened to me. I was overwhelmed with the knowledge that this was what I wanted to do with my life. Preach the word. On returning home I immersed myself in my local church, got involved in leadership with the young folk and with Christian Endeavour.

Ann: Your concern for God's work throughout the wider world started then too, didn't it?

Bruce: Yes. On leaving school I used a gap year and was the first Scot to be sent to Nairobi with VSO, then in its infancy. That year's experience was an immense influence in many ways in developing my sense of call. I was working with Anglican missionaries amongst teenage boys in deprived areas of the city, so I saw missionary work at first hand, experienced a variety of worship and as we saw many youngsters commit themselves to Christ my vision developed for the larger world out there.

Ann: Your preparation for ministry involved an arts degree in

Modern History and Philosophy in St Andrews followed by a BD from Spurgeon's College London, and then to New College, Edinburgh, for your PhD. Not many evangelicals chose such an intense academic route in those days.

Bruce: Although several churches had approached me regarding local church pastorates, I was still felt a little unprepared for the rigours of pastoring, particularly as a single man. Dr Beasley Murray, the Principal of Spurgeon's was friendly with Prof. Tom Torrance and through that link there came the invitation for further study.

My years of study coincided with the beginning of what we might call an evangelical renaissance. Inter-Varsity Fellowship was very influential in that it developed the Theological Students Fellowship. There was very little research in philosophical, systematic and dogmatic theology, which was my field, though others like FF Bruce were working in biblical fields. Very quickly a literature developed, with the encouragement of the TSF, and now of course there is a very significant evangelical literature in all areas of theology so that the student of today has a massive resource.

The subject of my thesis was 'The Idea of Sin in the thought of Karl Barth and Reinhold Niebuhr'. During that time I was asked to find a seat in New College library for a BTI student. Remarkably, I found her the seat opposite mine, and later Valerie became my wife.

Ann: Suitably equipped with both wife and theology you then embarked on your first pastorate in Livingston.

Bruce: After all these years of study I was increasingly anxious to get my feet established in pastoral work. A group of Baptists had just started meeting in Livingston; I became their student pastor and as the church grew, their first full-time pastor.

Ann: Then came an invitation from Spurgeon's to teach there and you ultimately accepted.

Bruce: Ultimately, yes. It was a wrench to leave the pastorate and I turned down the first two positions Spurgeon's offered me. But then they asked that I go and teach evangelism and I had a sense that this was right, in that it justified my doctoral work and married my gifts, and so with our two children we left for the south. I eventually transferred to the chair of Theology in Spurgeon's.

Ann: It was there, in London, that you first began to write theological books.

Bruce: Initially the Baptist magazine asked me to write a series on 'fellowship' and that was later published as *We Belong Together*. I was then approached to write a successor to *In Understanding Be Men* which was the introduction to theology which IVF used with their student groups. That publication eventually became *Know the Truth*, which has been, I suppose, my biggest single contribution to the church in my lifetime. It has been revised and reprinted and is published in 13 languages worldwide. It is a continual thrill to run across people, both in Britain and in other parts of the world where I preach, who have been helped by that book. It's been an immense privilege to be a part of that.

Ann: Instead of continuing to contribute to the leadership of the College, you then returned to pastoral ministry and surprisingly found yourself in a new continent and culture.

Bruce: Yes, it was quite dramatic in a way. Although I preached each weekend I was missing the pastoral dimension with a continuing, living congregation. I remember driving back from a large church in the south of England one Sunday evening after a good day of preaching, and yet I felt

that something precious given me by God was dying within me.

That convinced me I really needed to get back to pastoral ministry. So we searched for God's will and place for us, and then almost when we had given up hope, out of the blue First Baptist Church in Vancouver approached me. It was a huge challenge to think of uprooting our family to such a different situation, but I agreed to visit with them and while I was there God met me in confirmation that this was the right place for us. I had been praying for the right pulpit from which to preach the word and as I walked out that first Sunday into that pulpit in Vancouver it was almost as if God said to me 'This is it.' I'd found the place we'd been searching for.

It was a huge hurdle to overcome the tremendous changes for us as a family, but God was good to us and there we had 17 wonderfully fulfilling years of ministry.

Ann: Your leadership gifts were developed there, Bruce, in that eventually you led a ministry team of 7. How vital is it today do you think to share ministry with others, either lay or ordained?

Bruce: I think we have to be careful not to think that patterns of ministry are necessarily transferable. We were ministering to a congregation and people of around 2,000, and a leadership team worked very well for us. Ministry in North America is never easy and Vancouver is the most secularised city in the entire continent. I realised that I could not handle developing the ministry of the church and reaching the unchurched on my own. We gradually built a team of colleagues, both men and women, with different gifts and ministries, and each new person enabled the ministry to reach a new segment of the community. The richer the team, the richer the overall ministry approach. In our postmodern culture, diversity is now so pronounced that to reach our communities for Christ, particularly in

urban centres we need to open up as many doors into the kingdom as we can set up. My experience was, that the more doors we set up, the more people found their way through these doors to Christ, and the more diversity and variety in our approach the greater was our overall influence and impact.

Ann: But the emphasis on preaching the word would be maintained through all that growth?

Bruce: Acts 6: 4 'We will give ourselves to prayer and the ministry of the word' was core to my calling to Vancouver. My role was to energise the ministry of the congregation and my colleagues. That involved me weekly in 20 hours of preparation for preaching and in addition a heavy pastoral load. One of the developments in the compartmentalisation of ministry these days is to have the preaching minister divorced from the pastoral work. That seems to me, with the greatest respect, not to be particularly helpful. I think it is critical to the aliveness and relevance of the preaching that we are with our people where we share their pains and sorrows and questions, and it is in that context that we wrestle with God's word to bring it to them.

Ann: Bruce you have retired early from First Baptist and are using these years to preach widely all over the world and to fulfill your role as Vice-President of the Baptist World Alliance. What elements would you identify in your development as a preacher?

Bruce: I am very thankful to God for a number of elements in my life that developed my ministry. I suspect these elements would be true, in different ways, of most preachers.

In my early Christian life through being exposed to the ministry of God's servants such as William Still, James Philip and Eric Alexander and others, I came to a deep persuasion about the sheer authority of Scripture. My time

at Spurgeon's as a student taught me two things: how to understand the text of the Bible and acquire the tools for rigorous interpretation of that text and also the craft of preaching. Both as a student and later as a teacher I spent a lot of time on the skills of preaching: sermon construction, organisation of material, use of illustration, etc., so that the kind of nitty-gritty of the preacher's craft was something I had the privilege of acquiring there.

Then my ministry in Livingston and Vancouver helped me earth all that in pastoral reality and developed the instinct to relate the biblical text to everyday life.

I often said to my students there are two basic questions that every sermon must answer. The first is 'What?' What is this text saying and how do I understand it in the context of the whole of scripture? Then the second is 'So what?' How does this text relate to the lives of these people sitting in front of me on a Sunday morning?

Ann: Your cross-cultural experience must have added a new dimension to your outlook on ministry.

Bruce: I do think we need to be very flexible in ministry. I never envisaged a fraction of the ministry that I have been involved in. We are living in an enormously diverse and dynamic world and while there are aspects that are undoubtedly threatening to our values and convictions there are also huge opportunities. The main challenges in cross-cultural ministry are to be aware of who we are ourselves, to be open to our new situation and then to listen very hard to what those around us are saying. Being with people and gradually learning to see life through their eyes and hearts is an essential ongoing process. This sounds so basic but God's love has to be central. Someone has said that the most important thing about a sermon is to love the people to whom you are preaching it. There is enough truth in that for every preacher to take on

board. That requirement is laid on every preacher actually.

Ann: Bruce, evangelism has always been on your heart as a preacher/teacher. You are returning to Scotland in January 2003 to give the Bible readings at Mission Scotland's National School of Evangelism. What would you hope to see emerge in Scotland as a result of such a gathering?

Bruce: I hope the conference in January will have at least four results.

I hope it will allow us to rediscover the centrality of mission in the purposes of God.

I long that it might bring us a new confidence in the gospel message as God's power for this generation as much as any previous one.

I hope, thirdly, that it might encourage us to become more daring and flexible in our presentation of the good news.

I pray that it will mark a watershed in the emergence of evangelism that will have credibility in its long-standing impact on people's lives.

As a footnote Bruce added that in visiting Shetland this summer, forty-five years after his initial visit to evangelise, he met many people who had been converted back then. They had gone on with the Lord to live lives of sanctity and great usefulness in the church. 'I think,' he said, 'that is the kind of reminder that we need, that evangelism can make a huge difference and that God can still give us fruit for his glory that will remain.'

Book Reviews

The Evangelism Handbook

Graham Warner

Eagle, IPS, Guildford, 2000, 272pp.
£8.99

ISBN 0 86347 368 7

Graham Warner is pastor of 'The 418 Project', Hemel Hempstead, and his thrust in this manual is that evangelism is the *raison d'être* of the church. In his introduction he relates his aim, 'I seek to identify 131 biblical principles taken from the earthly ministry of Jesus and from experiences of the first generation Christians. The second part of the book looks at more contemporary personal examples and makes 101 practical suggestions. Hopefully these will spark 1001 fresh ideas.'

Doubtless this handbook, the contents of which were used for lectures and seminars, has much helpful material and many practical suggestions for evangelism. Warner can express himself in 20th/21st-century lingo. He terms the Great Commission our 'job description', the visit of Jesus to Levi's house a 'repentance party', the Bible as the Lord 'recording His heart on paper'. But the theologically alert will quickly recognise where the author is coming from. His standpoint (to use the jargon) is 'charismatic' and he believes that all the gifts recorded in the NT should be put to use in the cause of evangelism.

Many readers will pick up on (a) his view of the atonement which is clearly universal and leads him to make rather wild statements, e.g. 'we are all born with the right to be clean from the contamination of sin.' 'I have always seen evangelism as a campaign for people's rights.' (b) his view of those who have never heard the gospel. Warner believes that since God can assess how people would respond, given different circumstances, then he is able to assess who would believe Christ given the opportunity. His conclusion is disturbing: 'our acceptance of Christ can be perceived

by our receiving of something or someone else.' One will want to ask, why bother to evangelise? (c) his suggestion that 'Christians should own and run pubs.' Ask the converted alcoholic what he thinks of that!

For what this book purports to be, it is weak on basics: sin, the new birth, repentance, faith, heaven and hell. I confess though, to finding it captivating, easy to read and at points very moving. But I would have to categorise it under a PG (pastoral guidance) rating before placing it on a church bookshelf.

Drew Moore, Lurgan

New Dictionary of Biblical Theology

Editors: T.D. Alexander, Brian Rosner
IVP, Leicester, 2000, 866pp. £29.99
ISBN 085111 976 X

This latest addition to the IVP clan of dictionaries displays the usual family characteristics of thorough scholarship, faithfulness to Scripture, and readability. As a comprehensive survey of the subject, it deserves a place on the bookshelf of any thoughtful Christian. The first section comprises some twelve in-depth articles on relevant topics such as the history of biblical theology, hermeneutics, the relationship of the Old and New Testaments, and preaching. These essays are long enough to be useful and yet digestible in a single sitting.

The second section focuses on the Bible text. Following some useful essays on major issues such as the Johannine *corpus*, a summary is provided for each book of the Bible. These summaries have two main features. First of all, they adumbrate the themes of the book rather like the introduction to a commentary. The second feature is even more useful, providing an explanation of how the book fits in to the plot-line of the Scriptures as a whole. Thus, for example, Leviticus foreshadows the work of Christ in its emphasis on the possibility of a relationship between sinful humans and a holy God.

The final section of the dictionary comprises articles on an extensive

range of topics falling within the purview of biblical theology. These articles include character studies of figures such as David, issues such as childlessness, and themes such as holiness. This section of the dictionary alone is worth the purchase price, providing a mine of information for sermon series. If you want to know what the Bible as a whole says about a subject, this is where to look.

The editors of this dictionary make the valid point that biblical theology has been a Cinderella discipline. They are too modest to say that their work at last gives Cinderella her rightful place at the ball.

Gordon Fyles, Dublin

The Sacraments in Protestant Practice and Faith

Ed. by James F White

Abingdon Press, Nashville, 1999,
168pp. £10.99

ISBN 0 687 03402 7

Let me begin with a confession. The sacraments do not fit easily into my theological comfort zone. My local church holds a communion service much less frequently than what seems to have been the New Testament practice and when I turn to the Reformers, Calvin and most of the others seem to be a bit 'high'. Perhaps James White's book on the sacraments would help me, his *Introduction to Christian Worship* (Abingdon, 1990) and *Protestant Worship: Traditions in Transition* (Westminster/John Knox Press, 1989) certainly have.

Considering that practice often shapes belief, White discusses the sacramental practice of the various Protestant traditions before he turns to their professed sacramental theology. So after an introductory chapter on 'Sacramentality', the chapter titles are 'Baptism in Practice and Controversy', 'Baptismal Meanings', 'The Eucharist in Practice and Controversy', 'Eucharistic Meanings'. Then the other five Roman Catholic sacraments and Christian Burial are discussed, followed by some 'Future Prospects'.

White's approach is chronological. His chapters usually begin with

Book reviews

reference to the mediaeval church or earlier, and then progress through the magisterial reformers, the Anabaptists, the English Puritans (often with reference to the Westminster Confession) before turning to Wesley and subsequent developments in the United States. He concludes with references to the modern liturgies of the American Lutheran, Anglican, Methodist and Presbyterian churches. Within a brief compass he outlines simply, clearly and fairly, though not superficially, the various practices and positions within mainstream Protestantism. In my view he succeeds well. Perhaps reference to contemporary practice within British churches would have been helpful, but that said, this is a fine introduction to the topic. It is one which I will use in class and recommend to the 'reading person in the pew', and yes, it has broadened a little my comfort zone.

Bill Addley, Union Theological College, Belfast

Daniel - Servant of God under Four Kings

Geoff Thomas

Brynterion Press, Bridgend, 1998, 151pp.

ISBN 0 85049 146 1

This little commentary comes from the pen of a preacher and pastor. It consists of four addresses on the Book of Daniel given at the 1998 Annual English Conference of the Evangelical Movement of Wales. The author states in his introduction that the biblical rationale behind the choice of book was that the themes appeared to be so relevant for the Babylon in which we live. All that follows bears that out.

Since the occasion demanded four addresses, Geoff Thomas organises the material of Daniel under the reigns of the four kings mentioned in the book, Nebuchadnezzar, Belshazzar, Darius and Cyrus.

Throughout each chapter the historical background is sketched in a

clear and lively way and, as one would expect from a preacher of Geoff Thomas' stature, there is plenty of helpful temporary and practical application for modern living.

Daniel is a book we need to read in our time because, in the face of a world that denies there is any big story behind what happens, Daniel affirms that there is a sovereign God and that history is his story. He reminds us that though God may often be hidden in the events of the world and of individual lives, his hiddenness does not equate with absence. Anyone reading the Book of Daniel for the first time could do no better than turn to this little book as a good commentary for daily Bible study. Although the individual chapters are quite long, they are helpfully divided into subsections and a chapter could be studied over several days. However, its use is not limited to that. Preachers would also find it useful in their sermon preparation. The exegesis is always clear and in the introduction there is even a note of the commentaries the author found most helpful himself. As such it has to be highly commended.

Graham Dickson, Edinburgh

Creative Styles of Preaching

Mark Berger Elliott

Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, 2000, 173pp. £12.99

ISBN 0 664 22296 X

This book on preaching describes itself as 'a travel guide of the homiletical landscape' and claims to have been designed for both students and experienced clergy. A series of nine chapters is devoted to as many different styles of preaching. Among those identified are pastoral, African-American, evangelistic, topical, narrative and imaginative. Brief introductions are given to each of the different types, and these are followed by two representative sermons by preachers such as Tony Compolo and Haddon Robinson, among others.

The content of the book is a refreshing and timely challenge to the tyranny of the three-point sermon. For me at least, the chapter on

preaching the literary forms of the Bible strikes a chord. Technically this may be categorised as 'genre-sensitivity', but the basic principle is simply that narrative will be preached differently from poetry, sermons on apocalyptic will take on a different shape to those on law, and psalms will be expounded differently from parables. The variety of genres that is inherent in Scripture is sadly lacking in so many sermons that have become standardised and predictable in shape. In the course of this chapter some very practical advice is given as an antidote to this monotony, and I would be happy to recommend students to browse through this material.

Similarly the book draws upon past masters of their art to provide some very helpful guidelines for the preacher of the topical sermon. Again for the novice, and as a refresher for the seasoned campaigner, there are some very practical suggestions.

Nonetheless, to this reviewer, reading an Afro-American sermon is rather like watching a film without the sound. While there is no doubt that the printed sermon gives the material greater permanency and wider accessibility, I am convinced that the pulpit rather than the page is the proper place to savour good preaching.

Desi Maxwell, Belfast Bible College

How to Get Really Rich: A sharp look at the religion of greed

Brian Rosner

IVP, Leicester, 1999, 156pp. £5.99

ISBN 0 85111 649 3

Rosner states, 'Greed has been glamorised and is a forgotten sin.' This book aims to look closely at greed and to define properly what it means to be really rich. Rosner shows how greed is idolatry that separates us from God and from each other. He urges us to learn contentment, share what we have and turn our insatiable appetites to the pursuit of God.

In a sharp, humorous, yet always challenging way, I found this short book a very lively read. It is a popular look at research carried out by Rosner for an academic monograph on the

subject of greed and idolatry in the ancient world. The book has obvious relevance when we consider our society and its obsession with money and possessions. Greed is equated with idolatry (Col. 3:5, Eph. 5:5); there is no more serious charge than this in the Bible. Therefore, a book giving a thorough treatment of this subject is significant. It combines meticulous biblical exposition with reference to history's great Christian thinkers and a perceptive insight into contemporary culture (including a number of anecdotes, illustrations and statistics useful for any talk on this subject).

The book is in effect an exposition of two short biblical texts. Chapters 2–5 ponder Colossians 3:5, 'Greed... is idolatry.' Chapters 6–8 spell out the implications of 1 Timothy 6:6, 'Godliness with contentment is great gain.'

He concludes by properly defining a biblical answer to the question of how we can be really rich. Rosner boils down his exposition to propose that: 'Seeking God is meant to be a life-long, all-consuming, all-embracing passion, which does not so much rule out the goal of getting rich as squeeze it out.'

This book would be a useful resource for anyone wishing to engage in a study of the overlooked sin called greed. It will challenge our materialistic thinking, with a warning to make us look at where our true priority lies.

Jonathan de Groot, Edinburgh

Introducing the New Testament

John Drane

Lion, Oxford, 1999, 480pp. £20.00

ISBN 0 7459 3984 8 (hb)

ISBN 0 7459 4410 8 (pb)

John Drane's completely revised and updated book on the New Testament is both stimulating and straightforward. When using the previous edition as a student, I found the book to contain a wealth of scholarly material in bite-size chunks. Drane gives a concise yet thorough study of the New Testament that is extremely reader-friendly.

Drane does not seek to examine each book of the New Testament in order, but rather takes a more thematic approach (as seen in chapter headings) and yet cleverly still reveals the context and essential message of each Gospel and letter. Therefore the book succeeds in its aim of introducing the New Testament to its reader. It is useful in filling out much background detail of the world in which the New Testament was written.

This revised edition includes a chapter at the end of the book on the interpretation of the New Testament. This addition is very insightful, although could have been more practical for the reader, since it is the only substantial revision to the book. However, Drane gives a number of pointers to bear in mind as we seek to bridge the gap of two millennia in presenting the ever-relevant message of Jesus Christ.

It is probably the most accessible survey of the New Testament in one volume and is a book for the student or the individual reader who wants to understand and be better informed of New Testament study. This book is a combination of interpretation of the text, historical detail (Drane cites many ancient authors) and good use of secondary sources. It also includes appropriate illustrations, maps and charts.

Overall, the book is well arranged and well balanced and I would recommend it to those who want to begin serious study of the New Testament.

Jonathan de Groot, Edinburgh

The Roaring of the Lion – A commentary on Amos

Ray Beeley

Banner of Truth Trust, Edinburgh and Pennsylvania, first published 1970, reprinted 1997, 117 pp. £3.95

ISBN 0 85151 715 3

This is a book whose time has come. Tardis-like, the book seems small until you enter its pages. It includes the whole (av) text of Amos, broken up into chapter-heading sections, and is enlarged by a multitude of references,

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importing a host of verses and passages from almost everywhere else in the Bible. Varied by relevant comments and extracts from preachers and others, their cumulative effect is powerful.

The genesis of the book is the author-teacher-minister's private study notes, used to clarify and illumine his thinking through the text, and it does all that for the reader. It is written in simple non-technical language and style, suited to the general reader and with frequent practical application, more annotation than commentary. The preacher will, no doubt, find it accessible and useful, working with the book open and the Bible alongside to turn up the references.

Ray Beeley's Amos must have seemed less relevant when reprinted in the eventful days after the Berlin Wall collapse led to the 'end of history'. In this post-September 11 world war on terror, divine bolts of fire on all the nations encircling Israel seem to have a very contemporary resonance. Inveighing against the rich, impatient for Sabbath to end to let them cheat again with their short-measure scales, in the post-Enron world, Amos would have a scathing column in the Washington Post. This is a time, and here is a good place to start, a wider study of the prophets.

Anyone who thought the prophetic message fragmented and ancillary must be convinced by Beeley's book that it is central, unified and pivotal in the whole kingdom and gospel message. Like a mainsail on the tall ship of God's saving purpose, Amos' message is guyed and stayed to Scriptures, behind and before. A condemnation that touches each one, yes, but a way to escape and a strong end-note of hope and salvation – the open heart will find the whole gospel here. Time for a fresh reprint – or put it onto CD-ROM please.

Neil McTaggart, Edinburgh.

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And Then There Were Nine

David C Searle

Christian Focus / Rutherford House,
2000, 192pp. £5.00
ISBN 1 85792 510 6

How good to see a book like this!

David Searle was moved to write this book after discovering a church movement in Korea which advocated the Lord's Day for sport and business. The whole premise of the book is based upon the understanding that when the New Testament refers to the 'Law' (such as in Rom. 6:15 'for we are not under the law but under grace') what is in mind is the whole system of Old Testament 'religion' rather than the Ten Commandments. David Searle shows that the moral law contained in the Ten Commandments is quite distinct and in a class of its own, not being subject to change or modification. He is quick to point out the 'grace' of 'Law' is grounded in the love of God for the good of mankind. Each commandment is studied individually and its relevance for the present age is highlighted. Every chapter commences with a short preface including an appropriate short prayer. The author is able to relax his reader so that he enjoys his subject, as he is taken step by step through each commandment. A biblical worldview is prominent through the author's approach of instructing the Christian that the Bible is much more than a book to find salvation – it is a manual for the whole of life. At the end of the book there is a Study Guide which asks searching questions that are bound to exercise the mind of any Christian seeking to please God.

As usual, David Searle is very readable, delightfully illuminating, and best of all, encouraging. He has the knack of making his reader want to be a good-living Christian, and he removes any fear one may have of becoming legalistic. The book is challenging, very practical, and is a timely reminder to our age that Christianity is all about worshipping

and revering a God who is holy and has the best interests of his creatures at heart.

George Macaskill, Stornoway

Making Sense of Paul: A Basic Introduction to Pauline Theology

Virginia Wiles

Hendrickson Publishers, Peabody, MA
(USA), 2000, 160pp. £12.99
ISBN 1 56563 117 X

This book ought to be packaged with a warning label: Handle With Care! Wiles offers a survey of the basic structure of Paul's theology for university students and laypersons who have little theological background and who may or may not be Christians. She begins (part one) by describing the basic motifs of Paul's pre-Christian Jewish theology (monotheism, eschatology, righteousness, law, sin). She then (part two) explains some of the main themes in Greco-Roman philosophy (human identity in society, the frailty and failure of human life, misperception of life), showing how Paul's thought parallels these themes. Finally (part three) she shows how Paul's experience with Christ affected his re-interpretation and re-structuring of these Jewish and Greco-Roman themes.

Given her proposed readership, Wiles eagerly seeks to be relevant and understandable, and in many ways she is quite successful. Her analogies and illustrations bridge the gap between the first and twenty-first centuries very nicely. But at other times her zeal tends to blunt the sharp edge of Paul's theology, as when she says it is not necessary to believe in Paul's God or Christ to benefit from his analysis of the human situation (p.7). At times her desire to systematize Paul's thought appears to overwhelm the textual evidence. Nevertheless, there is much value in her study, not least in her thoughtful interpretation of the major motifs in Jewish and Pauline theology: righteousness, law, sin, and Christ. Her explanation of the inability of the law to save is insightful and provocative, as is her threefold definition of righteousness. Her explanation of the

noetic effects of sin (misperception of God, righteousness, law, self) leads to a helpful discussion of how Christ and the cross shatter these misperceptions. However, her description of the cross as a death 'with us' seems to pointedly avoid substitutionary language (i.e., 'for us, or 'in our place').

Wiles is a good teacher and she offers much help in understanding Paul, but one must read her work critically and thoughtfully. In these days when Paul is much despised and misunderstood, especially by non-Christians (and even by some in the church), this book may be useful in enabling malcontents to see Paul more accurately and more sympathetically. Perhaps it will prove most beneficial in a group setting (as Wiles herself suggests) in which a Christian leader can guide the discussion and offer a thoughtful rejoinder to Wiles. Toward that end the book may be very helpful, but still – Handle With Care!

Robert Keay, St Andrews

Miraculous Healing

Henry W Frost

OMF/CFP, 1999, 125pp.
ISBN 1 8579 2530 0

This is a good little book on the subject of healing that is worthy of being read by anyone interested in the subject. It is a book which was written before its time, but one quickly gets used to his style of writing as his theories on important issues unfold. He presents a number of interesting thoughts on such subjects as 'Why are some people healed and others not healed?' and 'Who should or should not be involved in ministry?' Henry Frost adheres very much to the Scriptures throughout this book. I would strongly recommend it to all who are interested in healing.

*George Fox, Divine Healing Fellowship,
Scotland*